

A difficult Gospel's saving grace – A Homily for Trinity XIV

Isaiah 35.4–7a

James 2.1–10, 14–17

Mark 7.24–37

I once spoke a harsh word to a man I know with severe autism who needed my help. He screamed so loud it made my heart explode. He struck out at himself and sent a glass flying. I had needed to be on my own. The last thing I wanted was someone needing my help. I had spoken unkindly, and this person let me know in no uncertain terms.

This sort of thing happens to us all the time, though perhaps less dramatically. Of course, we might just apologise, make our excuses, and think no more of it. But today's Gospel gives an account of how Jesus faced such a situation.

It is a difficult Gospel given what we affirm about Jesus. The story puts him in a poor light. Jesus tells a desperate mother, in harsh words, that he will not help her daughter. But why does Jesus do this if he is without sin, if he is fully human and fully God? There is a view that Jesus already knew all things by virtue of his divine nature. If so, did he speak this way because he knew the outcome? Was it, as some suggest, a dispassionate test of this woman's faith? Is this what a loving God does?

Let us consider the context. Jesus has withdrawn from his disciples. Jesus often withdraws to be alone. To pray. To be with his Father. We

can wonder what was on his heart in those moments. In today's Gospel we know that before his encounter with the woman, Jesus has been rejected in his hometown. John the Baptist, his cousin, has been murdered. He has fed the five thousand, been arguing with Pharisees, warning his disciples against sin and wickedness. Did he feel the weight of all this? Did he have a premonition of the suffering he must undergo?

Whatever the case, Jesus withdraws from Galilee to the region of Tyre. A place of the Gentiles, beyond God's chosen people, to outsiders. He did not want to be recognised. But he could not escape notice.

In other moments in the Gospels when Jesus is interrupted, he responds with compassion. But what is his response here? To a desperate mother concerned for the safety of her daughter? A woman who rushed to him. Fell at his feet. Begged him. She, a foreigner. Not one of the children of God.

'Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs.'

These are harsh words. Did the woman's desperate state touch a nerve? Did Jesus in his exhaustion parrot the worst of Israel's clichés about outsiders. Whatever the reason, how can they be uttered by love incarnate?

As Christians we cannot say that Jesus sins. This would mean Jesus goes against his own divinity, who he is in relation to the Father. But he we can and do affirm, with St Paul, that in Jesus God made him who had no sin to be sin for us (2 Cor 5:21). Jesus takes on our wounded humanity to heal it. He works our salvation not just in a single moment on the cross but throughout his life of which the cross is a culmination. He reworks our human condition from within, bringing it into the loving embrace of the divine life he shares with the Father in the Holy Spirit. Is this what is happening in our Gospel today?

Well, if it is, then it is happening in an unexpected way. Because in seeking to hide and be alone and in his dismissive words to the woman, Jesus treads the path of a lonely saviour figure only to show how spiritually bankrupt it is. Beyond this, Jesus shows how he depends on others. Or rather he lets the woman he rejects show us.

The woman answers Jesus' harsh words by saying, 'Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs.' Full of firey wit, she will not be intimidated. She will not play the victim.

I wonder, what happens in that moment between Jesus hearing these words and replying to her 'For saying that, you may go—the demon has left your daughter?' Did he taste the depth of human meanness coursing through his flesh? Did he see that there was only one way forward after he had spoken harshly? Jesus had to trust this other person, this woman, this mother. Jesus needed her help. Was this an

echo of Mary's yes, upon which God and the universe waited? Was this like his own mother nursing him in his vulnerability as a child?

And when this Syrophenician woman answered him. Trusted him despite his words. Jesus did what only he could. Cast out the demon, healed her daughter, brought the good news to those outside the people of Israel. Then the woman and Jesus could return home.

In this encounter, we see played out what the letter of James today says with such force: faith without works is dead. Dead faith is convinced of its own rightness, withdraws from others, hides behind callousness, stereotypes others, speaks mean words. Dead faith is faith without relationship, without trust, without love and so no faith at all. James frames this in the context of an attack on those who claim to believe in Christ but fail to honour the poor and help the needy. Jesus in his interaction with the Syrophenician woman goes a step further. Living faith requires that we open ourselves to the claims of all who have needed our help and whom we have dishonoured so that we might help each other. This may be a family member we have treated unfairly, a victim of violence we exclude from our community, someone whose need we overlook despite sharing a morsel of bread with them under the table of the altar.

This is not simply about the moral demands of the Gospel. It is about entering more fully into the life of God revealed in Christ. In his interaction with the Syrophenician woman Jesus shows that the

divine life works our salvation through relationships of mutual trust. Some theologians have controversially suggested this means that there is something like faith in God's own knowledge. And perhaps they are onto something. This is knowledge that is always open to more, to wonder. Knowledge that relies on relating to another who cannot be possessed but whose difference is celebrated and loved. This is the knowledge of the mutual delight shared between Father and Son in Holy Spirit. It is the knowledge Jesus embodies, a knowledge that allows him to be surprised by others, even challenged by them. A knowledge that he calls us to share in a faith founded on trusting God and others, especially those whom we have cast aside yet who still call to our hearts.

I opened this sermon with an account of my own harshness and a vulnerable man screaming. This was his response to my words of anger. My wanting to be left alone. His response was not as quick witted as that of the Syrophenician woman. Broken glass, blood, shouting. But like her, he responded with everything he had. And, despite my harshness, he again asked for my help. And, in that moment, when the world was spinning, I needed his. I needed him to trust me. I did the only thing I could, I held out my hand to him, and suddenly he took it. And the demon left us both. And we both came home. Thanks be to God.