

When I read through this morning's gospel reading - the part about the Canaanite woman thinking Jesus can perform miracles for her and the disciples wanting to keep Jesus as their own special teacher - I got to thinking about what it must have been like for Jesus to have all of those preconceptions and expectations constantly laid on him by everyone he met.

I think any of you have held a public position may have some sympathy with this. Perhaps I'm particularly sensitive to it because when you go about in a funny collar, you can't help but be aware that it sets off a chain of preconceptions and expectations in people's minds. I particularly have that feeling when I go into hospital. Although you would think that the sight of a vicar coming down the corridor in a hospital would not be such an unusual one, you are very aware that people do a quick double-take when they see you coming. And as I walk into the ward to visit someone, I can't help wondering what all of the nurses, patients and visitors are thinking.

Some of them are possibly thinking positive thoughts but I have no doubt that others will harbour a negative stereotype of what a vicar represents. 'If God is on your side, why don't you just pray and the person you are visiting will get better?' they might be sarcastically thinking. But usually, the person that I'm visiting knows that I haven't got all of the answers; I can't explain why God has allowed them to be ill or why prayer won't necessarily make them get better. They don't bother asking those questions because they understand that faith is more about the hope in which we live our lives than supernatural tricks.

Anyway, back in this morning's story, Jesus and the disciples have gone into the land of Tyre and Sidon, which is Canaanite territory. The Canaanites, you might remember, are the people whom the Israelites have been waging war against for many years.

So, this Canaanite woman demands that Jesus help her in the way that he's been helping his own people. She actually shouts at him, we're told, 'Have mercy on me Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon.' At this time, many of the diseases and ailments that are easily treatable today would have been life-threatening. People's hold on life must have been much more tenuous than it is for most of us. Indeed, scholars estimate that average life expectancy at the time of Jesus was 30-35 years. So certainly, a person with a mental illness (i.e. someone who was 'tormented by a demon') would not have stood much chance of

being cared for and would probably have been left to wander around by themselves until a sad fate befell them.

But in the midst of swirling preconceptions and expectations, Jesus actually seems to be dumfounded at this point because we are told that he just stood there not answering while his disciples urge him to send her away because she's just not their sort of person... So then we get this fascinating exchange where Jesus at first sides with the disciples and tries to send the woman away saying that the spiritual food that he brings is only for God's children (i.e. the Israelites) and to give it to her would be to 'throw it to the dogs'. Not really a very nice thing to say when you think about it – especially when you consider that 'the dogs' are what Israelites used to call the Canaanites. *Proof, if you like, that racism has existed in all times and places.*

But the woman isn't having any of this and she catches him out by saying, 'Even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table.' That this woman loves her daughter so deeply that she would abase herself before an Israelite teacher if there were hope of her being healed seems to shake Jesus. It actually seems to teach Jesus something about the nature of faith, hope and love and he tells the woman that her daughter will be healed.

Now it would be much easier to sidestep the tricky fact that at the beginning of this story, Jesus behaves rather arrogantly – dare I say it, even in a racist way - toward this Canaanite woman and that the woman actually teaches him a lesson. Clearly, this is a problem if you want to see Jesus as an untouchable embodiment of human perfection in his earthly life. But the doctrine of the incarnation tells us that in Jesus, God came to earth as a human being and it seems to me that part of being human is to allow ourselves to be taught by others and to learn from our mistakes. If God is unaffected by becoming human then nothing is achieved. And I think it's quite interesting to think about this Canaanite woman engaging with God incarnate because she was so desperate to receive healing for her daughter and teaching him something about how love breaks down barriers in the process.

The important thing for me is that although Jesus momentarily allows himself to be swayed by the demands of the crowd, he breaks through their preconceptions into a new way of understanding. He also takes the expectations of the woman and turns them into a sign of the kingdom like he does in so many stories. He doesn't perform a magic trick in

order to get the crowd to adore him, he tells the woman that her faith, born out of love, will mean that her daughter is freed from her demon.

When I read the gospels, it seems to me that Jesus is on a journey towards perfection throughout his lifetime. He isn't perfect throughout the journey because he couldn't be fully human if he was. Jesus is shaped by the expectations and preconceptions of others but he bends and shapes these expectations and preconceptions into a new form of perfection at the end – which is pure self-giving love.

There's an optional prayer in our service book called 'The Prayer of Humble Access' that we sometimes say before we approach the altar for communion: *We do not presume to come to this your table, Merciful Lord, trusting in our own righteousness but in your manifold and great goodness. We are not worthy so much as to gather up the crumbs under your table. But you are the same Lord whose nature is always to have mercy. Grant us therefore, Gracious Lord, so to eat the flesh of your dear Son Jesus Christ that we may ever more dwell in him and he in us. Amen.*

Do you recognise it? I don't know whether you've twigged but it's from today's gospel reading that we get those words. What the story teaches us is that we cannot place restrictions of our own making on God's love. There are depths to God's love that we can never understand and it isn't for us to decide whom it reaches. And so, in the words of the prayer, we approach the altar to receive Holy Communion not trusting in our own righteousness but trusting only in our hope in God's love. And God calls us to be on this same journey throughout our lives, a journey of overcoming preconceptions so that our lives may be slowly transformed – not by having all of the answers but by carrying Christ in our hearts and allowing others to see Christ living in us.