

20th Sunday of Ordinary Time
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And his disciples came and urged him, saying,
'Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us.'

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of
the Holy Spirit.

Amen.

I know how the disciples were feeling!
They had followed Jesus all over the place, as he
taught and healed, as he withdrew from the
crowds, on lakes and up mountains.

In the previous chapter of Matthew's Gospel, the
crowd followed Jesus to a deserted place, and did
not have the good sense to bring a packed lunch.

The disciples had seen some amazing things!

The feeding of the five thousand: Jesus walking
on water: all who touch Jesus are healed. He

argues with the Pharisees and scribes who have come all the way from Jerusalem to question him.

And then in the passage we have today, they leave Galilee and head towards Tyre and Sidon, *in partibus infidelium* – this is Gentile territory. So the disciples must have been tired and worn out, on their guard in an unfamiliar, unfriendly place. After the confrontation with the Pharisees, they must have worried about how long this exile would last.

And then the last thing they need.

A Canaanite woman starts following them, and shouting something about demons. They probably just wanted to get something to eat and go to bed. Jesus doesn't say anything. And so the disciples, perhaps after conferring amongst themselves, sidle up to the Lord and say, 'Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us.'

Not an unreasonable request, given the circumstances.

And yet, things don't happen quite as they might have expected.

We have all been in the disciples shoes.

We get back late from work, and decide to ignore the phone as it rings – some of you may have seen the recent BBC drama Broken, where a priest's decision to do just that has drastic consequences.

When I was a curate, I was walking past the local Chinese as an incredibly drunk man came out. He looked puzzled to see me, and wanted to tell me he was the antichrist. I should probably have stopped to tell him God loves him, but I just carried on home. I'm sure you can all think of times when the thought of dealing with someone else's problems just seemed too much; when like the disciples, you just wanted someone else to make the problem go away.

What happened next must have surprised them. This brief encounter is difficult to interpret.

Some have seen Jesus' response as shocking and offensive; others have explained it as a teaching method, as a way of Jesus highlighting this woman's faith. What is clear, though, is a tension we see in all readings, and indeed throughout the Scriptures – and that is to do with the relationship between Jews and Gentiles.

Our reading from Isaiah shows that there is a place for the Gentiles in God's plan of salvation: 'the foreigners who join themselves to the LORD, to minister to him, to love the name of the LORD, and to be his servants, all who keep the sabbath, and do not profane it, and hold fast my covenant — these I will bring to my holy mountain, and make them joyful in my house of prayer; their burnt offerings and their sacrifices will be accepted on my altar; for my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples.'

The Gentiles, though, approach the God of Israel through Israel: they are to keep the Sabbath, and the covenant.

And so it is perhaps unsurprising that in today's Gospel, we see a woman of great faith, find the healing she seeks for her daughter, *through* an encounter with Jesus Christ.

Jesus considered his mission primarily to the lost sheep of the house of Israel, and elsewhere he tells the disciples to go nowhere among the Gentiles.

And yet, like at Cana when he performs his first public miracle, even though his hour had not yet come, Christ responds to this woman's faith with compassion.

'Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.'

The Gospel does not relate the disciples' reactions. They were undoubtedly surprised. Perhaps they were a little underwhelmed - there is no suggestion that the woman had her daughter with her, and so this may have been a miracle at a distance. I'm sure they were regretting their earlier words:

'Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us.'

The disciples' reluctance could have cost this woman her encounter with Salvation.

And that is something we would do well to think about.

The life of love to which Christ calls us requires us to be attentive to the needs of others. One of my favourite prayers in the Common Worship wedding service is:

'May the hospitality of their home bring refreshment and joy to all around them; may their love overflow to their neighbours in need and embrace those in distress.'

This is a prayer for all of us, whether we are married or not – because faith isn't an idea, something we think about, like a crossword puzzle. Faith is a relationship, and a way of living our lives. Our faith means that *our* love should overflow to our neighbours in need, and embrace those in distress.

This disciples in today's Gospel are not a very good model of this. The Canaanite woman no doubt taught them a lot!

Because in this healing miracle, we see love overflowing:

It is not on her account that she comes to Jesus, but it is for her daughter.

Her love leads her to call out, 'Lord, help me.'

There are countless ways in which we, as individuals and as a church, are like the disciples here – 'send her away.' There are times when people stretch out their hands in need, and we turn them away. We might not even know we are doing it sometimes. I don't say this to be disheartening, but to remind us that our faith requires us to be attentive to others. We are changed by our encounters with others, and we are changed most profoundly by those encounters we would rather avoid! Fortunately, there is Jesus in the midst of us. In spite of the Church's frailty, the Lord brings healing to all who call on him.

Amen.