

Matthew 15: 21 – 28 The Canaanite Woman's faith sermon Year A

Gregory Boyle is a Jesuit priest who for the past twenty odd years has lived and worked within the gang culture of Los Angeles. One day he was visiting a detention centre and talking to a fifteen-year-old inmate called Rigo, asking him about his family. Rigo broke down when describing his father who used to beat him with a metal pipe. When Gregory asked about his mum, Rigo pointed to a small, tired looking woman and said, "I've been locked up for more than a year and a half. She comes to see me every Sunday. You know how many buses she takes every Sunday – to see my sorry ass?" Rigo began to cry again, "Seven buses. She takes seven buses. Imagine".¹

This is the sort of fierce, determined mother love we see in today's gospel story. A tenacious love that doesn't give up, that is willing to put up with being ignored, being abused to do right by one's child. That makes it such a heart-warming story. But it's also an uncomfortable story about race, gender and religious issues. People being taken out of their comfort zone. People acting in ways that affront. Boundaries being pushed up against, and crossed.

¹ Gregory Boyle, "Tattoos on the Heart", 2010, p.27.

Jesus has taken his disciples to Tyre and Sidon. Tyre (in modern day Lebanon) is 160 kms away from Galilee, they are deep inside Gentile and probably unfamiliar territory. Not only are Jesus and the disciples surrounded by gentiles, they are surrounded by people many would argue they have good reason to dislike. Tyre was a wealthy port city, but without good farming soil due to its location. The region of Galilee was its breadbasket. When the crops failed and food became scarce, grain and other produce, farmed by poor subsistence Galilean farmers, was sent north to the tables of wealthy urban Tyre residents who could afford the inflated prices. How many times had the disciple's families gone hungry while Tyrian families were well fed? The haves and the have nots.

And now the disciples are confronted with this woman, crying out to Jesus. A woman speaking out in public! A gentile, a Tyrian coming to them for help! I imagine the disciples are appalled, embarrassed, perhaps a little angry as well. This woman is pushing boundaries and I imagine they think Jesus' initial silence to her cries an entirely appropriate response to this sort of shocking behavior. Perhaps they think she is getting what she deserves?

Yet why is Jesus silent? Is it merely to test her faith, to see how long she is willing to make a spectacle of herself? Could it be because he is grappling with issues surrounding his mission? Or perhaps grappling with issues surrounding prejudice? We don't like to think that of Jesus do we. Jesus: fully divine and yet fully human – the mystery of the Incarnation. The Word made flesh, sharing our humanity in a particular time and place, with a particular ethnicity and culture. Absorbing all its presumptions and assumptions and even ... prejudices. Did Jesus ever find it difficult to stand beyond the rhetoric and mindset that infused his cultural and religious identity even when it divided and excluded?

The disciples certainly want nothing to do with her. "Send her away", they say to Jesus, her plight has nothing to do with us. To which Jesus makes the response, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel". Who is he speaking to, only the disciples, or the woman or even himself? Is he giving himself permission to stand back and ignore – God told me to care for these, not them?

But the woman doesn't give up. She kneels in front of Jesus begging for his help, exposing herself to the prospect of more ridicule and anger. So Jesus directly addresses her, "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs". Remember that dogs were not beloved pets, but unclean scavengers, tolerated because they

ate refuse and garbage. Was Jesus simply insulting the woman? Testing her mother love? Was he drawing her attention to the issue of the haves and the have nots? Was he challenging her to remember the times Galileans had gone without while Tyrians had plenty? Was Jesus simply giving her a mission statement? What do we do with a statement like that?

We know what she did. “Yes Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from the master’s table”. It is simply a masterpiece of retort. Notice she doesn’t try to argue the label is unfair, try to justify herself or her request. She doesn’t dispute Israel’s priority. However, she avoids being trapped and characterised as the enemy – she takes what is being projected and uses it to her advantage.

I believe this woman speaks with the gift of prophetic insight, she focuses on what truly matters. Yes, this is a story with gender issues, race and religious issues, issues of entitlement and prejudice. But I believe it is essentially a story about mercy, about grace and love and how that is lived out in everyday life. Even the dogs get the crumbs. We are entitled to be heard, to be taken seriously, to be respected. To be recipients of that which we need to continue on in life’s journey, to live and flourish. God’s mercy, and grace and love is not confined to this group, or that group. This woman’s daring

response reminds both Jesus and us of this fact. And so her love and faith obtain for her, her deepest desire.

This mother's willingness to endure vilification, humiliation and rejection - born out of tenacious, committed love, speaks into the very essence of Jesus coming among us: to reveal that we matter, we are loved. To be allowed and empowered to live beyond circumstances, beyond labels, beyond barriers, to be welcomed as one also made in the image of God.

At present we live in a society grappling with all sorts of issues. Issues of entitlement and prejudice based on race, on gender, on religion, on sexuality. Who are the 'dogs' in our society? Just what are they entitled to? Who are you today? The woman, desperately kneeling before Jesus, begging for a different future? A disciple; indifferent, angry at the audacity of the other, perhaps justifying their circumstances? Could you be Jesus, again acknowledging the encompassing grace and mercy of God, and reassessing your focus, your actions and your treatment of others in light of this?

Who are you today?