

We could begin by noting that this is one feisty woman. Or, at the risk of irreverence, we could begin by noting that Jesus is one rude man. Rather than focus on one or the other, I suggest we explore the relationship enfolded in this remarkable gospel story and then ask about the implications for us.

That the encounter between Jesus, the Jew, and this woman, a Gentile, even occurred was remarkable enough, but the fact that Matthew chose to tell it, and not erase it from history, makes it astounding. After all, this woman was not just any Gentile, she was a Canaanite, and as such represented a despised, indigenous rural population with whom Jews were forbidden to associate. Yet she, the despised outsider, addressed Jesus as “Lord, Son of David,” and revealed herself to be a believer, and not merely a pagan from Canaan. That in itself is worth noting. But what about Jesus? His initial reaction was so offensive that some have argued that it didn’t happen. It was planted by Jewish Christians who didn’t approve of the church’s mission to the Gentiles, but Gentile Christians later added the happy ending to prove their point. Then there are those who want to clean up the story by claiming that when Jesus referred to dogs, he was using the Arabic diminutive that means he was referring to household pets, like a term of endearment. Some say that he was merely testing the woman’s faith, as if that makes his behaviour any better.

I disagree. They are misguided attempts to defang the gospel story by ignoring Christ’s humanity and dismissing the life-changing power of faith that dares to take risks for the sake of those who suffer. All attempts to domesticate the gospel so that it conforms to our expectations render it a sentimental tale with little power to influence our lives or change the world. The same can be said about all attempts to domesticate Jesus. Instead, I suggest accepting the story as it is, with its rough, rude edges, listening carefully for what Jesus revealed about God and what this feisty, pagan woman revealed about the nature of faith.

Some Biblical scholars insist that the more difficult the story, the more likely it was historically true. Why? Because if one was to make up a story about Jesus, it is much more likely to be one that presented him in a positive light. This one does not, at least not on the first glance. Perhaps, you’ll remember the film version of *The Last Temptation of Christ*. It was nearly as controversial as Mel Gibson’s *The Passion of the Christ*, but for different reasons. The film, and the novel, focus intensely on the humanity of Jesus, suggesting that Jesus, before accepting the cross of redemption, fantasised about being married, having children, and living out his days with his family in the country. It was all a dream, but the mere suggestion that Jesus might have entertained such thoughts at the hour of his crucifixion scandalised millions of people, including believing Christians.

Why be offended by the humanity of Jesus? The Christian faith has always taught that Jesus was fully human and fully divine, and that has been a struggle for some, from the very beginning. If we believe that Jesus was indeed fully human, then we can assume he passed through all the trials of every human being. He laughed and he cried; in fact, nowhere was his humanity more poignantly revealed than when his dear friend Lazarus died. Jesus wept. He lashed out in anger at the injustice of religious leaders. He suffered emotional torment in the

garden. And here, in this surprising encounter with a despised indigenous woman, Jesus revealed his initial narrow understanding of his full vocation. Acknowledging the full humanity of Jesus allows us to marvel even more with wonder and gratitude at the full divinity of Jesus whose love was displayed for all. In the end, it was a woman — a religious outsider — who opened his heart to the fullness of his divine vocation.

She pleaded not for herself but for her tormented, suffering daughter. Initially, Jesus ignored her. But, she would not be deterred. She, the outsider, knew who he was even more clearly than he did at that moment. Though she called him by the familiar Jewish phrase, “Lord, Son of David,” she knew that he was Lord of the universe, unrestrained by ancient boundaries. Her pleading turned to screaming. Isn’t that appropriate for a mother heartbroken by her child’s suffering?

When someone is suffering, it is not the time to be meek and mild, polite in prayer, as if there was nothing at stake in the venture. No, true prayer involves the risk of authentic, honest expression. Anything less is hardly worth the effort. The natural outcome of prayer is compassion for the other. Prayer that remains isolated from the suffering can too easily become a spiritual exercise of self-indulgence. On the other hand, prayer that boldly dares to intercede for the suffering person not only draws one closer to God, but it opens the heart in deep solidarity with the one who is hurting. This is true prayer.

The disciples, threatened by this outrageous display of dangerous, risk-taking prayer, urged Jesus to send her away. Dismiss her with all the other pagan outsiders, they said. Jesus started to follow their misguided advice, insisting that his mission was singly focused on the lost sheep of Israel. However, once she had his attention, she was not going to let go. If it is true that faith is a verb, not merely a noun, then this Canaanite woman displayed fully what this means in practice. Even when Jesus tried again to dismiss her with a rude proverb about children and dogs, she continued her banter, insisting that even dogs get the crumbs that fall from the table. We cringe at the dialogue, but what was important was the radical, risky faith of this woman on behalf of the suffering one.

Jesus began by ignoring her and ended by praising her. Her faith summoned forth his divine healing, and in an instant, the barrier between insiders and outsiders was demolished. She went on her way, the demons fled from her suffering daughter, and once more, we get a glimpse of Jesus’ true vocation.

How about you and me? Is there anything in your life that you want to be certain you bring fully before God in prayer? Will you risk being tenacious, fierce, and feisty before God in the confidence that God is worthy of all your prayer and desire? It would be so much easier to let go of our desires, our needs, and our hopes for the other in the face of what appears to be silence from God. Our prayers seemingly go unanswered, and we walk away in silence. Perhaps that is to give up all too easily.

It is also much too common to look upon ourselves and believe that we are unworthy to ask God for anything, much less to ask for the very thing that will help another. We start to

believe the lies that undermine our faith and well-being. We believe the gifts of God come to those who deserve them, and we certainly aren't among the deserving crowd.

Then we might wonder if the risk of being fully vulnerable before the Lord with all our fierce desires for what is good for another is just too difficult. Vulnerability requires a level of courage and faith that is much more demanding of us than merely being content with our religious life without ever really stepping fully into a live relationship with the Lord Jesus in prayer.

The encounter with Jesus and this woman teaches us a different way. She dared to be vulnerable with her deepest desires, undeterred by the power of shame or those who were scandalised by her raw requests. She showed us courage before the Lord, and in showing us courage, she also showed us a quality of faith that opened the heart of our Lord. What is even more remarkable is that this woman was an outsider to the faith. Are our eyes and ears open to learn from the outsider about faith and courage?

This feisty Canaanite woman teaches us to be daring in prayer, relentless in pleading the cause of the suffering, and faithful in believing that one day the demons who torment the wounded will flee and in Jesus, healing will happen. Let those who have ears to hear, hear.

Amen.

Fr Robert Newton