Trinity 11A 16/08/26

I first met today's Gospel a long time ago, aged 12, in *Prince Caspian* by C. S. Lewis, part of his famous *Chronicles of Narnia*. Reepicheep was my twelve year old hero. Reepicheep is a Talking Mouse, the leader of the Talking Mice of Narnia; he is irascible yet imperturbably courteous, utterly without fear, and motivated by a deep concern for honour. Reepicheep, the bravest mouse of all Narnia, loses his tail in battle. As he bows to Aslan, the Great Lion, the King of Narnia, he realises the terrifying absence of something very important.

"I am confounded," said Reepicheep to Aslan. "I am completely out of countenance. I must crave your indulgence for appearing in this unseemly fashion.

"What do you want with a tail?" asked Aslan.

"Sir," said the Mouse, "I can eat and sleep and die for my King without one. But a tail is the honour and glory of a Mouse."

"I have sometimes wondered, friend," said Aslan, "Whether you do not think too much about your honour."

"Highest of all High Kings," said Reepicheep, "permit me to remind you that a very small size has been bestowed on us Mice, and if we did not guard our dignity, some (who weigh worth by inches) would allow themselves very unsuitable pleasantries at our expense."

"Why have all your followers drawn their swords, may I ask?" said Aslan.

"May it please your High Majesty, " said the second Mouse, whose name was Peepiceek, "we are all waiting to cut off our own tails if our Chief must go without his. We will not bear the shame of wearing an honour which is denied to the High Mouse."

"Ah!" roared Aslan, "you have conquered me. Reepicheep, for the love that is between you and your people, you shall have your tail again."

Jesus is distressingly unkind in today's Gospel reading from St Matthew. Our informed, tolerant, accepting selves curl up at the edges when Jesus puts the Canaanite woman in her place. St Matthew doesn't even give her the dignity of having a name. Jesus refers to her as a dog, making her the most unclean, unworthy individual imaginable. Every ounce of wrath in the Hebrew Scriptures has come to bear on her people the Canaanites. Moreover, she's a woman. She has no authority, no social standing, no property, no status at all. Even Reepicheep the mouse has much greater standing in Narnia than the Canaanite woman has in ancient Palestine.

She should count herself lucky Jesus pays any attention at all. The Pharisees would have had absolutely no time for such a bold woman. Any sensible teacher would have taken great offence at her audacity. The disciples find her cries irritating.

Finally, Jesus is forced to turn to her and draw the line. We've all done it. Sometimes we need to do it. We don't have the time. There is too much at stake, too much to do. Our lives are crazy enough. We can't get involved.

In here is a hidden gem of Good News. For a fast-paced, over-worked, high-tech society like we are, perhaps we need a Saviour who can draw the line, who can say no. Jesus isn't trying to be a superhero. Why should we? But what happens next in this Gospel is perhaps one of the most remarkable dialogues in all of Jesus' public ministry.

St Matthew has devoted line after line to accounts of Jesus' message being totally misunderstood. The disciples can't see for a moment into the metaphors of the parables. The Pharisees are confounded and annoyed at Jesus for shaking their cage of rules and regulations. The people swarm around hoping for something wonderful to happen. They're like a crowd you would imagine at Woodstock in the 60's.

Then comes along a woman, a Canaanite woman no less, who seems somehow to understand completely; because, in her pithy little statement about dogs and tables and crumbs, she makes her refreshing claim to grace. She even embraces Jesus' metaphorical language: something the apostles can never quite seem to manage. It's all so bold, so insightful, and, to Jesus' ears, so terribly beautiful. Immediately, this Canaanite woman, this outsider, stands head-and-shoulders above the crowd, and even the disciples must cower in her shadow.

Her faithful assumptions are strikingly simple. She knows Jesus can heal her daughter. She has, in one sense, rejected her role as submissive and boldly struck out for justice. On the other hand, this Canaanite woman comes before the Saviour and asks in all the humility of her station for her place in the Kingdom of God, however little a portion that may be.

Jesus is thunderstruck. She gets it. No matter how tiny she is from the Jewish point-of-view, she is willing to struggle faithfully — even with God himself — to obtain healing for her daughter. She has assumed her rightful position in the Kingdom. She is among the first drops from the tidal wave of Gentiles who are to be welcomed into Christ's loving arms.

Today's Gospel is not about faith in what we deserve. It is about faith in the grace we need. It is about our struggles for justice, righteousness, and dignity right in God's face. It is about an insistent faith that will continue to pursue truth even at the expense of all cultural and societal boundaries. It is about our wrestling directly with a God "in whom we move and have our being" for our healing. And, brothers and sisters, it is about a God whose heart we can change, whose head we can turn.

We're a people constantly uttering, "Thy will be done," to a lofty Lord enthroned above. Our theology wonders about how our prayer can change the mind of a God who knows everything, "to whom our needs are known before we ask." We know we're dealing with a God who says, "My ways are not your ways." And we know we're reckoning with a God who, all-too-frequently, allows suffering to run its course.

But let us take seriously the faith of the Canaanite woman: a faith that stands head-and-shoulders above our own. Let us indeed put our faith in a Creator who made the stars and the galaxies, a Spirit who is active in the deepest fibres of our being, a Saviour who spans our beginnings and our endings.

But let us also remember a God who, in a miraculous event quite beyond our comprehension, made creatures capable of surprising the divine consciousness. Then let us fervently pray that our Saviour might satisfy our thirst for justice, righteousness, and healing.

Listen! We just might hear a voice saying, “Ah! You have conquered me!”

Let us pray in the prayer given to us in the Book of Common Prayer- the Prayer of Humble Access reflecting the encounter with the Canaanite women and how we can learn from her approach: *We do not presume to come to this thy Table, O merciful Lord, trusting in our own righteousness, but in thy manifold and great mercies. We are not worthy so much as to gather up the crumbs under thy Table. But thou art the same Lord, whose property is always to have mercy: Grant us therefore, gracious Lord, so to eat the flesh of thy dear Son Jesus Christ, and to drink his blood, that our sinful bodies may be made clean by his body, and our souls washed through his most precious blood, and that we may evermore dwell in him, and he in us. Amen.*

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