

**Reflection for 19-20 August 2017**  
**Twentieth Sunday of Ordinary Time, Year A**  
***Mike Britton***

*Text: Isaiah 56:1, 6-7; Romans 11:13-15, 29-32; Matthew 15:21-28.*

Jesus is focussed on his own people, and plays on the common Jewish epithet for other Semitic peoples, referring to the woman as a lap-dog or a puppy and dismissing her. In any language, calling someone any kind of dog is pretty insulting. She not only persists, but becomes the only person in the Gospels to win a battle of wits with Jesus, simultaneously refuting Jesus' dismissal and humbling herself before him; Jesus is compelled by honor to help her if he can—and he does, with joy. This may even be a turning point in his own life and ministry.

Sickness is a terrible thing; when I or someone I love is really sick, it becomes a focus, and I'll do anything I can do to help. That focus is what Jesus is looking for in everyone who comes to him, and although it often begins in bodily adversity, it can be sublimated and reach beyond suffering to God. The Canaanite woman bets all her honor on Jesus healing her daughter; if he doesn't, she will be as good as outcast by her people for having foolishly and uselessly abased herself to this Jewish foreigner. Her daughter's illness has brought her to where everything else she could lose doesn't matter anymore, and there she finds God.

This reminds me of several other Gospel passages: of the parable of the man who found out about a treasure buried in a field, and sold everything he had so that he could buy that field;<sup>1</sup> of the widow who donated her only two tiny coins at the Temple;<sup>2</sup> and of the man born blind, who held to the truth even though his society and his family turned against him for it.<sup>3</sup> That's commitment.

Imagine for a moment someone never baptized coming here looking for God but even with our invitations, too timid to come up to receive the Eucharist, spotting an unnoticed crumb dropped during Communion and snatching it from the floor. We can argue about theology, but I think God will not forget that person's faith. As Paul writes of the Jews, I would be shamed by such faith.

Usually, I find myself instead like the rich man, who has followed the commandments, but still feels that something more is needed. When Jesus tells him that he has to give up everything and follow him, he is too comfortable in his wealth to let go of it and dedicate himself fully to God.<sup>4</sup> So many things seem indispensable, but Jesus tells us to pray simply, “Give us this day our daily bread.”<sup>5</sup> Letting go of the apparent safety of honor, wealth, and power is hard, but only God, only the treasure hidden in the field, will really endure.

The Beatitudes<sup>6</sup> describe this link between suffering and holiness. It’s not the suffering itself that’s holy; God wants joy and happiness for us, not pain. Affliction, though, can shake our complacency in the world, and distract us from our distractions. The risk, of course, is that our pain absorbs all our attention, and we can’t see God through it. The Canaanite woman is a model of this balance.

Two thieves were crucified with Jesus, and in their agony, called out to Jesus in different ways. The first saw only the suffering and demanded that Jesus take them down from the crosses, but the second saw beyond, and trusted that Jesus, even crucified and obviously not coming down from his own cross, still mattered, praying “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.”<sup>7</sup>

When we pray at the Offertory that God accept the offering of “our very selves, open to [God’s] will,” are we willing to step beyond safety and stake everything on receiving even the scraps that fall from the Master’s table? I hope that we will mean it even a little more today than yesterday when we pray, “Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done on Earth as it is in Heaven.”<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew 13:44

<sup>2</sup> Mark 12:41-44

<sup>3</sup> John 9:1-12

<sup>4</sup> Matthew 19:16-24

<sup>5</sup> Matthew 6:11

<sup>6</sup> Matthew 5:3-12

<sup>7</sup> Luke 23:39-43

<sup>8</sup> Matthew 6:10