

“IT’S A DOG’S LIFE!”

(Matthew 15:21-28)

Grace, mercy and peace to you from God the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

Dear friends in Jesus,

It's a dog's life! That could be good or bad. Some dogs are treated badly. They are beaten, neglected, not fed properly, and get into all kinds of troubles. Other dogs are very well looked after. They are spoilt, eat the very best food, pampered, loved by families — especially the children. Some dogs seem to have far better lives than some humans.

The setting for our text is around the Tyre and Sidon area, north-west of Jerusalem on the Mediterranean coast. Here Jesus met a Canaanite woman. She is not included among the people of God. She is not a Jew. She is a Gentile. She represents anyone who is regarded as morally and spiritually unclean.

She falls down before Jesus and cries out, *'Lord, have mercy on me! My daughter is possessed by demons — mental illness!'*

Jesus did not answer a word. He totally ignored her. So the disciples urged Jesus to send her away. Why? *'She keeps on crying out after us. We're sick of her!'*

Then Jesus answers, *'I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel!'* He is testing her.

She kneels before Jesus. She is desperate. In those days there were no mental hospitals or medical treatment for such a condition. She believes in Jesus. She cries out, *'Lord, help me!'*

What a strange reply from Jesus. *'It is not right to take the children's bread and toss it to their dogs.'* The 'children's' refers to the 'lost sheep of Israel'; the 'dogs' refer to the 'Gentiles'. The literal translation for 'dogs' is 'little dogs', meaning a pet dog in the house, not a farm dog or a ferocious dog. Jesus' point here was that the good news was to be given first to the Jews.

This was the experience of the Canaanite woman who came to Jesus with a huge problem. Her daughter was possessed by demons, and she was hurting and confused. How could she endure the pain of having her daughter tormented by demons? She didn't know, and so she cried out to Jesus for help. By doing this she revealed both her need and her faith. She loved her daughter very much. She needed help and believed that Jesus could provide that help.

And so she cried out to Jesus to heal her daughter. But he did not answer her a single word. He ignored her. He treated her as if she didn't exist. To be ignored like this was very harsh treatment, and she knew it. No doubt she thought, 'Why is he so silent to me? Is it because I am a Gentile and he is a Jew? What is the reason?'

But she didn't give up. She became so insistent that Jesus' disciples urged him, '*Send her away!*' If their conduct disturbs us, what about Jesus? At first he ignored her, and when he did speak, he rebuffs her. '*I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.*' Choosing to brush aside his objection, the poor mother knelt down before him pleading, '*Lord, help me.*' She believed he could help. She would not allow herself to be put down. And he answered, '*It's not fair to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs.*' He seems to be saying that he can help Jews only, while she is a non-Jew, whom the Jews call 'dogs.'

She dared to take Jesus at his word. In effect she now says, '*You call me a dog, Lord. That's alright. Only give me a dog's privilege. Permit me to have the scraps that the children do not want, and throw on the floor. That will be enough for me.*' Even the crumbs that fall on the floor are enough. Here was a woman who exercised one of the really great freedoms of being a human being, the freedom to take a stand towards one's conditions. She accepted her position as a dog, and asked for a dog's privilege. '*Just let me have the crumbs that fall from the Master's table.*'

Now, at last, Jesus answered by granting her request. '*O woman, great is your faith! Be it done for you as you desire.*' And her daughter was healed instantly. At long last we learn the reason for our Lord's long delay in responding to her. Through his seeming disinterest, silence and rebuff Jesus was testing her faith in order to strengthen her. Now, by a word spoken at a distance, he healed her daughter instantly. At long last the strange conduct of Jesus begins to make sense. Through their relationship he was teaching her and us to be persistent in prayer.

We are not to lose heart if we do not get an immediate response to our prayers. Prayer is not a demand note. It is a relationship, a relationship in which we make our requests known to God, and then we leave it to him to decide what to do. And he will do it in the very best way. Let's remember what Jesus has done in our lives, and be so happy that he has looked after us so well.

By healing the daughter of the Canaanite woman Jesus revealed himself as the Messiah. That's what she had believed about him. That's why she came to him. Jesus is the long awaited Messiah. He is the Son of God and the Saviour of both Jews and Gentiles, and that includes you and me.

Yes, we have been treated like spoilt and much loved dogs. Jesus loves us so much, and feeds us with the very best food in his Word and in the sacraments of Holy Baptism and Holy Communion. He has healed us completely from our worst sickness of all, our sin, when he died for all those sins on the cross of Calvary, and then through his magnificent Resurrection. Now we can claim his wonderful promise to each one of us, *'Because I live, you will live also.'* He lives with us every day, and promises to take us to live with him, one day, in eternal and exciting heaven.

May his wonderful forgiveness and love for us cause us to respond like any well-loved dog — faithful, true, loyal, loving, trusting and serving. May we live for him every day, and share his care and healing and love with others.

Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.

Sermon by Pastor Graham Zweck 16 August 2020