

Today's Gospel reading is one of those dreaded by sermon writers. While perhaps not as tough as preaching on Trinity Sunday, today's passage has some challenging and mysterious content - encompassing selflessness, great faith and persistence, alongside great wit and some casual racism. There are many different perspectives in Bible commentaries, and no clear consensus on the "correct" interpretation – so this is my interpretation.

The story begins with Jesus and the disciples entering Gentile territory. The cities of Tyre and Sidon appear in the Old Testament as godless places, and the reference to the woman as a Canaanite positions her as one of the bitter enemies of Israel – often, it was the paganism of the Canaanites that led Old Testament Israel into bad habits.

So why were Jesus and his disciples going there? It seems the idea was to have something of a retreat; Jesus had started to gather large crowds at this point in his ministry. Perhaps the expectation was that Jesus could be somewhat more incognito, with fewer people following him - this might explain the disciples' seeming irritation at the woman's arrival into the scene. The woman approaches Jesus not on her own behalf, but to relieve the suffering of her daughter. She addresses Jesus as "Son of David" - a Jewish form of greeting. Perhaps it is this that leads to Jesus' response.

The disciples' desire for Jesus to "send her away" seems harsh and lacking compassion; but Jesus' response that he was sent only for Israel makes more sense if the disciples were asking Jesus to help her first – at this stage they had seen many miracles and couldn't doubt Jesus' ability to heal. Jesus' answer "I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel" is perhaps what a Canaanite would have expected from the Son of David. Nevertheless the woman is courageous and persistent; refusing to take no for an answer, pleading for help.

It is then things take an interesting turn. Jesus says, "It is not right to take the children's bread and toss it to dogs". This gruff response is disturbing; dog was a term commonly applied to Gentiles because the Jews considered these pagan people no more likely than dogs to receive God's blessing. Jesus' meaning in using this phrase isn't clear, and we don't have the context of *how* Jesus says these striking words to inform their meaning. One aspect seems to be as a test of the woman's faith. Her quick-witted reaction – if she's a dog, then she'd at least like to have a dog's rations – is fantastically strong in faith. Her "great faith" contrasts with the "little faith" of Peter; when walking on water, this Jewish disciple looked at the troubles ahead caused by the wind, was scared and lost faith. In contrast, the Gentile woman doesn't waver and is rewarded for her persistence.

I believe Jesus also uses this phrase and his subsequent healing of the woman's daughter to teach his disciples and contrast the existing Jewish attitude to his own. I don't believe it's by accident that this passage appears after Jesus's confrontation and teaching of the Pharisees that inner purity is of more value than outward purity and pride. While the Pharisees focus on the traditions of their elders, the woman doesn't assert any special place at Jesus' table, instead taking what is on offer. She is willing to accept an inferior position to help her daughter.

It's an uncomfortable truth that we are all the dogs in this story. We have no right to claim superiority – whether over women or men, or over different races or peoples, or indeed over people of different backgrounds or traditions to ourselves. As the prayer of humble access says, we aren't fit to eat the crumbs from under God's table.

However, it is God's nature is to have mercy. Today's prophecy from Isaiah notes that all – Jews and Gentiles – can approach God through faith in his Messiah. We can't rely on our traditions; but if we have a strong, tenacious and persistent faith we can overcome the challenges of this world. This faith will be reflected in how we behave, our care and concern for others who are different to us, and the extent to which we are prepared to be humble and dependent on God. Through this, we can have confidence that our prayer of humble access will be granted. **AMEN**