

**Pentecost 16B, September 9<sup>th</sup>, 2018**

**Readings: Proverbs 22:1-2, 8-9, 22-23, Psalm 125, James 2:1-10, 14-17, Mark 7:24-37**

### **At Rest or In Motion**

#### **Introduction**

*What was in your head when you rejected this Canaanite woman?*

*What were you thinking, when you likened her to a dog?*

*Did this woman, this Canaanite, teach you something about life, about you, about God?*

*Did she teach you that Canaanite women actually matter?*

The first half of Newton's First Law of Motion says this: "an object at rest, stays at rest". This does not just apply to objects; it also applies to people. For the most part, we human beings prefer situations to be stable, stalled, static, still. Religion, faith also fits this predisposition: the more at rest it is, the more unchanging it is, the more persuasive, the more convincing it appears. I have often wondered why, and have concluded that it may have to do with the way we assume that God and 'the things of God' never change, that they are eternal, as in fixed. Certainly, the Greeks thought that way - in fact Plato's thought, which followed exactly those lines - shaped Christian thinking more than is commonly understood. The most outstanding Father of the western Church, Augustine, was in fact a disciple of Plato, before becoming a Christian. When we turn to the Hebrews however, when we turn to Jewish thought, this idea of the things of God as perfect, static arrangements, is open to question. For the Hebrew, everything is in flux, nothing is at rest, not even God.

#### **The Gospel**

With that observation in mind, let us turn to the Gospel reading for today. The reading itself is quite long, involving two stories: that of the Syro-Phoenician woman and that of the deaf and mute man. Let's focus on just one; the first one: that of the Syro-Phoenician woman.

This is perhaps the most disturbing story of the New Testament. It certainly is the most unsettling story in the Gospel of Mark. I want to examine the story from two perspectives: that of Jesus and that of the woman. But first, let's recite the events. As the story goes, a woman who is not a Jew, approaches Jesus in order to seek the healing of her daughter. Jesus' response is to say the least something we don't expect; no, more than that, troubling, brutal. In response to her request, he challenges her, describing her and her child as dogs. His insult, is met however with a counter-challenge, with courage and tenacity: even the dogs should not be ignored.

Now, let's dig deeper! We will ask three questions: What is at stake here for both Jesus and the woman? Second, what changes, where is the movement or motion? Third, what is happening here with regard to the perception of God?

#### **1. What is at stake here?**

*For Jesus, what appears to be at stake, is the religious tradition, that which understands Judaism as "a given", as "a given for the Jews". There is a place for the non-Jew, for*

the outsider, yes, but at best, it is only secondary. If we look further, we can explain this hostility in terms of two realities: a static, paralyzed exclusivist theological tradition; and an historical enmity: this woman is associated with three major historical opponents of Israel – she represents the old Canaanites, the Greeks and the Romans – she is a triple enemy. Finally add to that the gender dimension: she is woman. So, theological tradition and political and cultural history, explain what is going on. They also explain Jesus' derision of her and her child as "dogs" (kunarion). Let us be clear, this is no gentle saying. Jesus is not endearingly referring to the child as a cuddly puppy; nor is he just speaking 'tongue in cheek'; nor testing the woman's faith. This is what Jesus believes, and this is what any Jewish rabbi of the time 'worth his salt' *would* have said. Outsiders, are dogs! They are marginal to the plans of God.

For the woman, in contrast, what appears to be at stake is the very life of her young child. This child's life was at risk. This woman was driven, utterly driven to save her... and in striving to do so, even to approach a Jewish rabbi who had a reputation as a healer.

## ***2. What changes here, where is the motion or movement?***

In Jesus, we find an extraordinary change, a dramatic transition, a revolution in personal psychology. Jesus is persuaded that this woman's argument is correct. And this is not about faith as such. The story does not even refer to her religious faith as a factor in his change of attitude. Instead, he is convinced by her reason, by her appeal to justice, to natural, reasonable justice... "even the dogs under the table, eat the children's leftovers".

For this woman, the motion is all about desperation for the sake of another – her child. But it is a motion that moves her from mute acceptance of the child's condition, through painful lament, to actually striving to change, to transform the situation. All her emotional, imaginative and intellectual energy is focused upon one thing.

## ***3. What is happening here with regard to the changing perception of God?***

On the face of it, Jesus moves away from the God of the public religious institution, the inveterate conservative God. What we find here is a movement inward. Jesus moves from a God who is at eternal rest, a God who never changes, to a God in motion, to a God who responds to real human suffering. In a sense, Jesus moves from static institutional faith to the dynamic faith of the mystic, upsetting the apple-cart, challenging the rules. To use the famous expression of the German Middle Ages mystic, Meister Eckhart, Jesus "appeals to God against God," or more provocatively put, "I pray God, rid me of God". Jesus, pushes the limits, appealing to what Hebrew theology understood as a God in perpetual motion.

A more recent Christian, Cardinal John Henry Newman put it this way: "In a higher world it may be otherwise, but here below, to live is to change and to be perfect is to change often."