

What adjectives best describe Jesus? What descriptors would you use to characterise the wandering preacher from Nazareth? “Full of love”, “gentle”, “meek and mild”; these would all have their supporters no doubt. “Firm”, “forceful”, “determined” are also likely candidates, and all find support in the Gospel narratives. “Rude”, “racist” and “chauvinist” would not figure too highly in most people's lists – unless you have been listening carefully to today's Gospel-passage.

The picture that first appears in Matthew's account of Jesus' encounter with the woman of Canaan is not at all pleasant. He is rude. She comes to him pleading for her sick daughter. Other possible means of helping her child have, we must imagine, either not worked or been too expensive for her means. So she approaches Jesus whose reputation has gone ahead of him even into Gentile territory. She is a Canaanite. By now an obscure term for the ancient inhabitants of the land which became the territories of Israel and Judah. The Canaanites have a bad press in the Jewish Scriptures as idolators whose very presence in the Land is a danger to the faith of the Chosen People and so they are to be wiped out. That never took place and the peoples lived side by side. Why Matthew uses this archaic word is not clear.

She, a foreigner, approaches Jesus using honorific titles most unusual on the lips of an outsider. She calls him, “Lord”, which is the equivalent of our “Sir”, but is also the Greek substitution for the sacred name of God in the Scriptures; and she calls him “Son of David”, a messianic title hardly expected from a foreigner.

Despite the unusual recognition of him Jesus ignores her with silence. He does not give her the respect of an answer. His silence condemns her to the indignity of non-personhood. A refusal, a command to go away would at least acknowledge her existence. Ignoring her denies her even that.

The disciples take up her cause; not out of concern for her, it seems, but because they are embarrassed by her noise; she is disturbing their peace! She is making a scene, drawing attention, making them feel uncomfortable. Jesus is adamant. She is a foreigner; his calling is to the House of Israel. She is not his concern and she should not be theirs. When he sent them out in pairs he was clear: the disciples were to go only to the lost sheep of the House of Israel. Their mission, and his, is to the Jewish people. Others need not apply.

These days we call such an attitude racist.

The woman will not be put off. She follows; she falls at his feet and continues her pleading. Again she calls him “Lord”; and her posture with this title implies she

might see in him something more than her social superior. In response Jesus calls her a dog. More accurately the Greek says, “little dog” but the distinction, if there is one, is lost. “It is unfair to take the children's food and throw it to the house dogs” is his brusque reply.

Notice how her request was for healing but Jesus turns the conversation to food. This whole section of the Gospel is concerned with food – Jesus feeds the five thousand and so after the four thousand; immediately before this scene he is debating with the Pharisees about clean and unclean food. Affinity with Jesus involves eating with him; but as a Canaanite, a woman and a 'dog' she is unclean on every count.

But she has spunk. She accepts the rebuke. Yes she is a dog, but even dogs get scraps from under the master's table. It is a commonplace image. People ate with bread as their utensils and plate, and bread was used to wipe their hands and then discard for the house-dogs, ever lurking for such titbits.

Jesus' attitude changes with her reply. There is character and nobility in her response. Instead of countering rudeness with anger and abuse, which could come to naturally, she absorbs the rebuke and, with quickness of wit, challenges - and succeeds.

Jesus recognises her quality, her faith. Her daughter is healed.

Here we have a foreigner giving a lesson in prayer and in faith, as well as quickness of thought and courage. She persists and will not be silenced even when all the signs point to 'hopeless'; and she continues to believe and hope when there appears nothing left to believe in or hope for.

Last week Peter took a splash when his faith failed. “Lord help me”, he cried when buffeted by the wind and waves. This woman also cries, “Lord help me”, and will not be put off by Jesus' refusal to recognise her.

Earlier in the Gospel [chapter 8] Jesus healed the servant of a Roman soldier whose faith he also commended. Subtly Matthew is preparing us for the astonishing command that Jesus will give after the Resurrection. The disciples are to go out not just to the house of Israel but to the whole world. The courageous woman of Canaan helps the evangelist prepare for that momentous shift. All are called to the kingdom, Jew and Greek, slave and free, male and female. In a week past that has seen great violence in the United States about ancient issues of race, and a President dangerously ambivalent in his response, the Gospel tells us with power: The Lord's house will be a house of prayer for all the peoples.