

ST STEPHEN'S HOME SERVICE – SUNDAY 16th AUGUST
2020

INTRODUCTION

There's hardly an area of life where perseverance is not an invaluable quality! And yet so often people seem surprised that they might need it in their Christian lives, too. Jesus clearly recognised how easy it is to become discouraged, and encouraged his followers to 'keep on keeping-on' – in prayer, in meeting together, in doing good ... and, above all, in believing that God is faithful, and utterly trustworthy, however difficult life may get.

Today we see two people refusing to give up in the face of discouragement. St Paul wonders whether Israel's failure to accept Jesus as Messiah means that God has somehow broken his promises, but realises instead that Israel's temporary rejection of God's purposes is what has opened the door for the rest of the world to experience the wonder of God's mercy. And a woman 'wrestles' verbally with Jesus to save her sick daughter – and inspires both us and Jesus himself in the process.

Pause for a moment to allow God to refresh your sense of hope and trust in Him now, and to renew your belief that everything He does springs from love and mercy.

CALL TO WORSHIP

The Lord is here.

He is with us.

Near or far.

He is with us.

The Lord is here

We are His people.

The Lord is here.

He gives us strength for the journey.

The Lord our God is here.

And we welcome Him now.

TURNING AGAIN TO GOD

**Lord, You have given us so much love,
but we have not always accepted it.**

**You have shown us how to love,
but we have not always learned it.**

**You have told us whom to love,
but we have not always done it.**

**You have told us the cost of love,
but we have not always been willing to pay it.**

We are sorry for not understanding your love.

We are sorry for not sharing your love.

We are grateful for the love you offer, even now.

Lord, have mercy.

Christ, have mercy.

Lord, have mercy.

May the God of love and power
Forgive us and free us from our sins,
Heal and strengthen us by His Spirit,
And raise us to new life in Christ our Lord.
Amen.

CELEBRATING GOD'S MERCY (PSALM 67)

God be gracious to us and bless us

and make his face to shine upon us,

**That your way may be known upon earth,
your saving power among all nations.**

Let the peoples praise you, O God;

let all the peoples praise you.

**O let the nations rejoice and be glad,
for you will judge the peoples righteously
and govern the nations upon earth.**

Let the peoples praise you, O God;

let all the peoples praise you.

**Then shall the earth bring forth her increase,
and God, our own God, will bless us.**

God will bless us,

and all the ends of the earth shall fear him.

NEW TESTAMENT READING (Romans 1-2a;29-32, New Living Translation)

[Paul wrestles with the question: if Israel has rejected Jesus, the true Messiah, does that mean that God has rejected Israel, or failed to keep His promises? His conclusion is one of faith: No, somehow God will use even Israel's rejection of Jesus as an opportunity to show mercy to everyone!]

I ask, then, has God rejected his own people, the nation of Israel? Of course not! I myself am an Israelite, a descendant of Abraham and a member of the tribe of Benjamin. No, God has not rejected his own people, whom he chose from the very beginning.

For God's gifts and his call can never be withdrawn. Once, you Gentiles were rebels against God, but when the people of Israel rebelled against him, God was merciful to you instead. Now they are the rebels, and God's mercy has come to you so that they, too, will share in God's mercy. For God has imprisoned everyone in disobedience so he could have mercy on everyone.

Thanks be to God.

GOSPEL READING (Matthew 15:21-28 NRSV)

Jesus left that place and went away to the district of Tyre and Sidon. Just then a Canaanite woman from that region came

out and started shouting, 'Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon.' But he did not answer her at all.

And his disciples came and urged him, saying, 'Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us.' He answered, 'I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.' But she came and knelt before him, saying, 'Lord, help me.' He answered, 'It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs.' She said, 'Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table.' Then Jesus answered her, 'Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.' And her daughter was healed instantly.

Thanks be to God.

REFLECTION (by Sheila Nall)

Decades ago, the Gardeners' Question Time panel were discussing their favourite apples. The late, great Bill Sowerbutts suggested the Beauty of Bath for its outstanding flavour and texture. In his inimitable way he extolled its virtues and ended with this: 'Eee, Beauty of Bath. We don't know who she were but by 'eck she must have been a belter.'

When Jesus entered Tyre and Sidon, a Canaanite woman formed a one-woman welcoming committee. We don't know who she were either but by 'eck she must have been a belter too.

The Canaanite woman's greeting is part of a pattern; we find her words on the lips of others who approach Jesus with pressing needs: "Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David". Perhaps with her initial words, the woman is claiming an ancestral relationship to Jesus. Three women in Jesus' genealogy are Canaanite women: Rahab, Tamar, and Ruth.

The anonymous woman's forebears are Jesus' kin. The words "Have mercy" demonstrate the Canaanite woman's knowledge of his power and willingness to show mercy on all who approach him. The title "lord" by which she addresses Jesus acknowledges him as a man in relation to her as a woman and demonstrates respect for Jesus as a Rabbi. The phrase "on me" reveals her as the object the mercy she seeks, her request is a personal one; she suffers because her daughter suffers. And finally the title, "Son of David" is perhaps her way of acknowledging him as her kin, as royalty, and as the Jewish Messiah. The Canaanite woman strategically, clearly and succinctly confronts and informs Jesus of her problem: "my daughter is tormented by a demon". She does not directly request healing for her child, she desires mercy, which she presumes would take the form of an exorcism. After all, the

rumour was that people were simply bringing their sick and possessed to Jesus, and he healed them even when they just touched the fringe of his garments. She does not bring her daughter to Jesus, it appears. But she expects something good to happen.

And what does she get? Nothing. Initially, Jesus fails to even acknowledge the Canaanite woman and her request for mercy. Anyone with a pressing need knows how horrible it feels to have a significant request for help or information met with dead silence.

Think of the Hillsborough Disaster campaigners who fought for 27 years for justice: Margaret Aspinall, Sue Roberts, Rita Wafer, Mary Corrigan. And the Birmingham Pub bombing campaign spearheaded by Julie Hambleton that has waited 43 years to be taken seriously.

Sue Smith whose son Phillip died in 2005 in Iraq – because of the known inadequacy of the Snatch land rover he was in. She took on the army and after 12 years of fighting for what she believed was right finally received an apology.

Like the police, like the Government, like the Army - **No one** immediately responds to the Canaanite woman either or gives the impression that they will respond. The disciples urge Jesus to send her away because, it appears, they are annoyed by her continued shouting, her refusal to take silence for an answer.

Too often we ignore people whose experience is different from our own. If the oppression, injustice, or pain is not happening in **our** house and neighbourhood or does not impact **our** race, gender, class, or sexuality, then we dismiss it as unwelcomed, unjustified noise. It took too long for Kensington & Chelsea Council to respond to the Grenfell Tower disaster – just as they had ignored residents' warnings.

Jesus' response to the apostles' urging to send the Canaanite woman away seems to show that he agrees with them: "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel" The fact that her people's blood runs through his veins and that his people's blood runs through her veins does not move Jesus! If our common humanity, our relatedness, does not move us, what will?

The Canaanite woman persists. Like Emmeline Pankhurst, Rosa Parks, Aung San Suu Kyi, Vera Brittain, Jo Cox, the unnamed Canaanite woman persisted. She persisted! She didn't go away; she won't be dismissed. She draws closer and kneels, and with the passion of a desperate, determined woman she cries, "Master, help me," And what does she get now? "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs".

Quick as a flash she comes back: "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table." The Canaanite woman's non-Jewish cultural context differs from

Jesus'; they allow their pets to be fed *while* the children eat. One can feed the children *and* feed the pets too! And it seems that Jesus has a light bulb moment. He relents and commends the woman for her faith. Jesus does not perform an exorcism; he doesn't go to see the child - he simply says, "Let it be done for you as you wish." The woman's powerful persistence, identified as faith, led to her daughter's healing.

Perhaps faith gives rise to persistence or maybe persistence feeds faith. Either way, persistence and faith make a powerful pair. Never underestimate the power of a persistent woman – even when it seems no one, not even God, is listening. Never give up - and never turn away.

PAUSE FOR REFLECTION....

"Never give up - and never turn away." We all know how difficult this can be when the rubber hits the road and we have to face the very real challenges of life. This poem by Ann Lewin expresses the very real sense of frustration and discouragement with which we often have to wrestle....

How long, O Lord, how long?
A silly question.

Do you, beyond the tick of time,
For whom a thousand years
Flash like an evening,
Do you know how it feels

When evenings, days, months
Drag, a thousand years?
The seeming endlessness of care,
Commitment carrying on
Long after energy is spent,
Do you, who slumber not
Know that bone-weariness?

"My strength sufficient." Yes,
I hear you, Lord. My head
Acknowledges that you are right.
The question in my guts is,
"Is it true? Can I hang on
Until your timelessness
Pervades my life, and
Makes the question meaningless?"

Ann Lewin, De profundis

WHO IS THE GOD IN WHOM WE TRUST?

**We believe in God the Father,
from whom every family
in heaven and on earth is named.**

**We believe in God the Son,
who lives in our hearts through faith,
and fills us with his love.
We believe in God the Holy Spirit,**

**who strengthens us
with power from on high.**

**We believe in one God;
Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.**

PRAYERS

In faith let us pray to the God
Who is Lord of all the Earth.

Holy God,
Fill your Church with a sense of trust in You
And with the faith which perseveres in doing right,
Even in the face of rejection and doubt.
Make us ready to be set on fire again and again
With Your love – a love
Which knows no exceptions, and accepts no limits.
Silence

Servant God:

Let us honour you with our lives.

Holy God, give your blessing to all people and agencies
Who speak out against corruption, deceit and wrongdoing,
Even when it costs them dearly;
And prosper the work of all who seek to encourage
goodness, honesty and compassion

among communities and between nations.
Raise up prophets in our age
Who will speak truth to power.
Silence

Servant God:

Let us honour you with our lives.

Holy God, we pray for all whose backgrounds and experiences
Make belief in a loving God seem impossible.
We pray for all who suffer mental or emotional anguish
And those who despair.
We pray for those facing another day of pain,
Another day of hunger, another day of fear.
Silence

Servant God:

Let us honour you with our lives.

Holy God, we thank you for the joy of human love,
And for all those among whom we live and work.
We pray particularly for loved ones
Who worry us with their health, circumstances or life direction.

In a moment's silence, we hold before God the people and
situations especially on our hearts.

Silence

Servant God:

Let us honour you with our lives.

Holy God, gather into your eternal kingdom
All who have come to the end of this earthly life
And rejoice to see you as you really are.
We remember all whom we love but can no longer see,
And thank you for your overarching love
And undergirding faithfulness to us.
Among those whose anniversaries fall at this time we
remember Owen Laws, Alison Hargrave, Eric Gething, John
Pritchard, and Cecil Miller.

Silence

Servant God:

Let us honour you with our lives.

Holy God, we remember with gratitude
All who gave up so much
To spread the Good News of your love for all people,
And we pray that with us it may continue to be spread
Until the whole earth knows of your truth and love.

Silence

Servant God:

Let us honour you with our lives.

The Lord's Prayer

We pray as Jesus taught us, saying:

**Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come,
your will be done,
on earth as in heaven.
Give us today our daily
bread.
Forgive us our sins
as we forgive those who
sin against us.
Lead us not into
temptation
but deliver us from evil.
For the kingdom, the
power,
and the glory are yours
now and for ever.
Amen.**

**Our Father, who art in
heaven,
hallowed be thy name;
thy kingdom come;
thy will be done;
on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily
bread.
And forgive us our
trespasses,
as we forgive those who
trespass against us.
And lead us not into
temptation;
but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom,
the power and the glory,
for ever and ever.
Amen.**

Merciful Father

Accept these prayers

For the sake of your Son,

Our Saviour, Jesus Christ. Amen

ENDING

Loving God, bring us all to life

by the power of your love.

Transform our brokenness into blessing.

As we go on our way,

May our minds be full of your voice,

our hearts full of your love,

and our thoughts full of your praise.

And may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ,

The love of God,

And the fellowship of the Holy Spirit,

Be with us all evermore. Amen.

*Opening and Ending Prayers – based on extracts from A Wee
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