

Sermon and Readings 12th Sunday After Pentecost 16th August 2026

Genesis 45.1–15

¹ Then Joseph could no longer control himself before all those who stood by him, and he cried out, 'Send everyone away from me.' So, no one stayed with him when Joseph made himself known to his brothers. ² And he wept so loudly that the Egyptians heard it, and the household of Pharaoh heard it. ³ Joseph said to his brothers, 'I am Joseph. Is my father still alive?' But his brothers could not answer him, so dismayed were they at his presence. ⁴ Then Joseph said to his brothers, 'Come closer to me.' And they came closer. He said, 'I am your brother Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt. ⁵ And now do not be distressed, or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life. ⁶ For the famine has been in the land these two years; and there are five more years in which there will be neither ploughing nor harvest. ⁷ God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant on earth, and to keep alive for you many survivors. ⁸ So it was not you who sent me here, but God; he has made me a father to Pharaoh, and lord of all his house and ruler over all the land of Egypt. ⁹ Hurry and go up to my father and say to him, "Thus says your son Joseph, God has made me lord of all Egypt; come down to me, do not delay. ¹⁰ You shall settle in the land of Goshen, and you shall be near me, you and your children and your children's children, as well as your flocks, your herds, and all that you have. ¹¹ I will provide for you there—since there are five more years of famine to come—so that you and your household, and all that you have, will not come to poverty." ¹² And now your eyes and the eyes of my brother Benjamin see that it is my own mouth that speaks to you. ¹³ You must tell my father how greatly I am honoured in Egypt, and all that you have seen. Hurry and bring my father down here.' ¹⁴ Then he fell upon his brother Benjamin's neck and wept, while Benjamin wept upon his neck. ¹⁵ And he kissed all his brothers and wept upon them; and after that his brothers talked with him.

Psalm 133

¹ Behold how good and how lovely it is:
when families live together in unity.
² It is fragrant as oil upon the head, that runs down over the beard:
fragrant as oil upon the beard of Aaron, that ran down over the collar of his robe.

³ It is like a dew of Hermon:

like the dew that falls upon the hill of Zion.

⁴ For there the Lord has commanded his blessing:
which is life for evermore.

Romans 11.13–32

¹³ Now I am speaking to you Gentiles. Inasmuch then as I am an apostle to the Gentiles, I glorify my ministry ¹⁴ in order to make my own people jealous and thus save some of them. ¹⁵ For if their rejection is the reconciliation of the world, what will their acceptance be but life from the dead! ¹⁶ If the part of the dough offered as first fruits is holy, then the whole batch is holy; and if the root is holy, then the branches also are holy. ¹⁷ But if some of the branches were broken off, and you, a wild olive shoot, were grafted in their place to share the rich root of the olive tree, ¹⁸ do not vaunt yourselves over the branches. If you do vaunt yourselves, remember that it is not you that support the root, but the root that supports you. ¹⁹ You will say, 'Branches were broken off so that I might be grafted in.' ²⁰ That is true. They were broken off because of their unbelief, but you stand only through faith. So do not become proud but stand in awe. ²¹ For if God did not spare the natural branches, perhaps he will not spare you. ²² Note then the kindness and the severity of God: severity towards those who have fallen, but God's kindness towards you, provided you continue in his kindness; otherwise, you also will be cut off. ²³ And even those of Israel, if they do not persist in unbelief, will be grafted in, for God has the power to graft them in again. ²⁴ For if you have been cut from what is by nature a wild olive tree and grafted, contrary to nature, into a cultivated olive tree, how much more will these natural branches be grafted back into their own olive tree. ²⁵ So that you may not claim to be wiser than you are, brothers and sisters, I want you to understand this mystery: a hardening has come upon part of Israel, until the full number of the Gentiles has come in. ²⁶ And so all Israel will be saved; as it is written, 'Out of Zion will come the Deliverer; he will banish ungodliness from Jacob.' ²⁷ 'And this is my covenant with them, when I take away their sins.' ²⁸ As regards the gospel they are enemies of God for your sake; but as regards election they are beloved, for the sake of their ancestors; ²⁹ for the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable. ³⁰ Just as you were once disobedient to God but have now received mercy because of their disobedience, ³¹ so they have now

been disobedient in order that, by the mercy shown to you, they too may now receive mercy. ³² For God has imprisoned all in disobedience so that he may be merciful to all.

Matthew 15.21–28

²¹ Jesus left that place and went away to the district of Tyre and Sidon. ²² 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.’ ²³ 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.’ ²⁴ He answered, ‘I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.’ ²⁵ But she came and knelt before him, saying, ‘Lord, help me.’ ²⁶ He answered, ‘It is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.’ ²⁷ She said, ‘Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table.’ ²⁸ Then Jesus answered her, ‘Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.’ And her daughter was healed instantly.

Sermon

Our Gospel story was rewritten and used a long time ago in a children’s story by C. S. Lewis, part of his famous Chronicles of Narnia. Reepicheep, the bravest mouse of all Narnia, loses his tail in battle. As he bows to Aslan, the Great Lion, the King of Narnia, he realizes the terrifying absence of something important.

“I am confounded,” said Reepicheep to Aslan. “I am completely out of countenance. I must crave your indulgence for appearing in this unseemly fashion.”

“What do you want with a tail?” asked Aslan.

“Sir,” said the Mouse, “I can eat and sleep and die for my King without one. But a tail is the honour and glory of a Mouse.”

“I have sometimes wondered, friend,” said Aslan, “Whether you do not think too much about your honour.”

“Highest of all High Kings,” said Reepicheep, “permit me to remind you that a very small size has been bestowed on us Mice, and if we did not guard our dignity, some (who weigh worth by inches) would allow themselves very unsuitable pleasantries at our expense.”

“Why have all your followers drawn their swords, may I ask?” said Aslan.

“May it please your High Majesty, ” said the second Mouse, whose name was Peepiceek, “we are all waiting to cut off our own tails if our Chief must go without his. We will not bear the shame of wearing an honour which is denied to the High Mouse.”

“Ah!” roared Aslan, “you have conquered me. Reepicheep, for the love that is between you and your people, you shall have your tail again.”

* * *

Jesus is disturbingly harsh in today’s reading from Matthew. Our modern, informed, tolerant and accepting sensibilities recoil when we hear the way Jesus responds to the Canaanite woman. Matthew does not even give her the dignity of a name. She is simply “a Canaanite woman”—an outsider in almost every imaginable way.

And then Jesus appears to put her firmly in her place. His words are confronting: “It is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.” To our ears, it sounds cruel. She belongs to a people long regarded as enemies of Israel, carrying with her all the hostility and judgement associated with the Canaanites in the Hebrew Scriptures. And she is a woman in a world where women possessed little authority, status or social power.

She could hardly be further from the centre of respectable religious life. She is foreign, female, desperate and apparently unwanted. Even Reepicheep the mouse seems to enjoy greater dignity and standing in Narnia than this unnamed Canaanite woman has in the world of ancient Palestine.

And yet, remarkably, she refuses to go away

Perhaps she should count herself fortunate that Jesus pays her any attention at all. The Pharisees would have had no time for such a bold and persistent woman. Any respectable teacher might have taken offence at her cheek. Even the disciples have had enough. Her cries are irritating them. “Send her away,” they tell Jesus, “for she keeps shouting after us.”

And finally, Jesus turns to her and appears to draw the line.

We understand something about drawing lines. We have all done it. Sometimes we must. We tell ourselves: I simply don’t have the time. There is too much to do. Too much responsibility. Too many things demanding my attention. My life is complicated enough. I cannot become involved in everything. I cannot carry

everyone's problems. And perhaps hidden here is a small gem of Good News for our fast-paced, overworked, high-tech world. Perhaps we need a Saviour who knows there are limits, who does not rush around trying to be everything to everyone. Jesus is not trying to be a superhero. Why should we?

But just when we think the boundary has been drawn and the matter settled, something extraordinary happens. The woman refuses to accept the boundary. She does not walk away. She does not become angry. She does not argue that she deserves better. Instead, she takes Jesus' own words and turns them back towards him: "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table." And suddenly this uncomfortable encounter becomes one of the most remarkable conversations in all of Jesus' public ministry.

Matthew has devoted line after line to people completely misunderstanding Jesus.

The disciples struggle to see beyond the surface of his parables. The Pharisees are confounded—and increasingly annoyed—because Jesus keeps rattling the cage of their rules and expectations. The crowds swarm around him, hoping that something wonderful might happen. At times, they seem less like disciples and more like spectators gathered around a three-ring circus.

And then along comes a woman. A Canaanite woman, no less.

An outsider. A foreigner. A woman without status, standing or authority. And somehow, she understands. In one short, brilliant sentence about dogs and tables and crumbs, she makes her claim upon grace: "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table."

She understands Jesus' metaphorical language and dares to enter into it. She takes the image Jesus gives her and hands it straight back to him. It is something the disciples themselves so often seem unable to do.

It is bold. It is insightful. It is faithful. And, to Jesus' ears, it is beautiful.

Suddenly this unnamed Canaanite woman, this outsider whom everyone else would happily send away, stands head and shoulders above the crowd. Even the disciples are left standing in her shadow. Her faith rests upon some surprisingly simple assumptions. She knows that Jesus can heal her daughter. She knows that her daughter is worth fighting for. And she believes that somehow, somewhere, there is a place for her within the mercy of God.

In one sense, she refuses the submissive role society has assigned to her. She speaks. She persists. She challenges. She will not disappear simply because respectable people would prefer her to be silent. Yet at the same time, she comes before Jesus asking only for mercy. She does not demand a seat of honour at the table. She asks for the crumbs. Because she knows that even a crumb of God's grace is enough. And Jesus is astonished. She gets it.

However insignificant she may appear from the perspective of the religious establishment, she is willing to struggle faithfully—even with God himself—for the healing of her daughter. And Jesus says, “Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.” In that moment, the outsider is brought inside. The woman who apparently had no place at the table discovers that the mercy of God cannot so easily be contained by the boundaries human beings construct around it. She becomes a glimpse of what is coming: one of the first drops in the great waterfall of Gentiles who will eventually pour into the Church and discover themselves welcomed into the loving arms of Christ. And perhaps that is where this Gospel becomes particularly uncomfortable for us.

Because today's Gospel is not about having faith in what we deserve. It is about having faith in the grace we need. It is about struggling for justice, righteousness and human dignity—even when the boundaries of religion, culture and society seem to stand against us. It is about a persistent, determined, almost unbearable faith that refuses to stop seeking mercy. It is about wrestling with God. Jacob wrestled with God and would not let go until he received a blessing. This woman wrestles with Jesus and refuses to go away until her daughter receives healing. There is something wonderfully biblical about such faith. We are a people accustomed to praying, “Your will be done.” We speak of a sovereign God whose purposes are beyond our understanding. Our theology reminds us that our needs are known before we ask. Scripture tells us that God's ways are not our ways. And painful experience teaches us that sometimes our prayers do not receive the answers for which we desperately hope.

All of that is true. But the Canaanite woman reminds us of another truth.

Faith does not always sit quietly and accept things as they are.

Sometimes faith cries out.

Sometimes faith argues.

Sometimes faith wrestles.

Sometimes faith refuses to go away.

Sometimes faith stands before God and says, "Lord, have mercy."

And then says it again. And again. And again.

Perhaps that is the faith Jesus sees in this extraordinary woman.

So let us take her seriously. Let us put our faith in the Creator who made the stars and galaxies, in the Spirit who moves within the deepest fibres of our being, and in the Saviour who holds our beginnings and our endings.

But let us also dare to approach that God with the audacious faith of this unnamed woman. Let us bring before Christ our longing for justice.

Let us bring our hunger for righteousness. Let us bring the people we love and cannot heal. Let us bring the wounds of our communities and the suffering of our world. Let us bring even those things about which we have prayed a thousand times before. And let us refuse to believe that our cries are an irritation to God. For the Canaanite woman teaches us that faith sometimes means refusing to walk away. "Lord, help me."

A Three-word prayer.

And perhaps, when we cling to Christ with that same stubborn, courageous faith, we too may hear the words that changed everything for this unnamed outsider: "Great is your faith." And grace will prove greater than all the boundaries we imagined could contain it. Amen.