

Year A

Matthew 15:10-28

At 25 years, Poon Lim was appointed second steward on a British Merchant Ship. There were a crew of 55 when the ship left Cape Town on 23rd November 1942. A few days later, a Nazi U-boat torpedoed them. The ship was sinking and on seeing this, Poon jumped overboard. The ship sank into the ocean and Poon tried to gasp for air in between the waves. He found a raft after two hours of struggle, swam to it and hauled himself on board.

Poon found some tinned biscuits, a metal water jug, a small supply of fresh water, some flares and an electric torch. He rationed himself and only ate two biscuits per day and drank a few sips of the water. With the supplies he had, he calculated that he would survive a month but Poon knew he had to find land when no one rescued him after a month.

He used the wire from the electric torch and a biscuit as bait to catch fish. After catching the first fish, it became easier, since he could use pieces of it as bait for his next catch. He also caught sharks and seagulls and drank

their blood. He used notches that he made in the wood to track the days he spent at sea. He also exercised by swimming twice a day. On his 131st day at sea, he saw the colour of water change and saw more kelp and birds. On the 133rd day, a small boat rescued him. He had crossed the Atlantic and was just at the mouth of the Amazon River. Poon had lost 10 kg but still managed to stay strong. He could walk unaided even after the whole ordeal. He holds the record for the longest survival on a life raft.¹

¹ <http://freepages.genealogy.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~judkins/survival.htm>

Against all odds, he came through: what determination and resolve to fight for life like that.

The Canaanite woman in our reading from Matthew's Gospel today showed determination in the face of rejection. Against all odds she got what she desired; healing for her daughter. This passage raises disturbing questions for the reader. Jesus attitude and behaviour towards the woman was outrageous. If we read this and don't have any questions then we probably haven't taken in what happened. The woman shouted at Jesus. He could hear her

clearly and yet he ignored her. He walked away. Furthermore, when the woman continued to pursue him and asked him again for help he demeaned her by referring to her as a dog. We have a similar way of speaking today but most of us would not use such language, but Jesus did! I have commented before that the 'gentle Jesus, meek and mild' image just doesn't fit with the Gospel stories and here is another case in part. He was rude and abusive and as his followers we are left to try and make sense of this. Some commentators have tried to sidestep the issue by suggesting that Jesus

didn't mean it. He was only toying with the woman, to make a point, before he delivered the healing. That doesn't do it for me because that kind of behaviour is no better than the outright abusive kind. Before we try and find a way forward that doesn't soft peddle the text because that would be no use, let's pause and ask the question; "how do we cope when Jesus doesn't stand up for us the way we had hoped?"

Both the hummingbird and the vulture fly over deserts. All vultures see is rotting meat, because that is what they look for. They thrive on that diet. But hummingbirds ignore

the smelly flesh of dead animals. Instead, they look for the colourful blossoms of desert plants. The vultures live on what was. They live on the past. They fill themselves with what is dead and gone. But hummingbirds live on what is. They seek new life. They fill themselves with freshness and life. Each bird finds what it is looking for. We all do too.

Throughout my ministry over twenty years and across numerous churches and locations I have been aware of a significant group of people who profess a Christian faith but do not attend church. For many of these people something has happened in the past

that is so big for them that they just can't get over it. Someone in the church may have been harsh to them. Some people in the church may have snubbed them. But often after spending a bit of time with these people something will emerge in conversation that has brought an end to their fellowship with others. I always sympathise because it is never pleasant to feel that you have been hard done by and that you have lost something because of someone else's harshness. However, it is also true that we all need to grow up. Part of growing up is being able to take a blow, whatever it may

be, and to get on from it. How must the Canaanite woman have felt when Jesus abused her? It must have been terrible. Strictly speaking, Jesus didn't do anything wrong. First of all a woman approached him in public. That was not appropriate within the cultural restrictions of the age. Second, she shouted at him. We too would be inclined to walk away if an unknown person approached us and started shouting. Third, she was unclean because she was a Canaanite and because her family was affected by the activity of an evil spirit. Keep walking Jesus, this has nothing to do with

you. Most people would have given up. Most people would have been despondent at Jesus' reaction. Most people would have become disillusioned with a teacher whose actions didn't match his words. She didn't; she kept coming.

I don't think we can ever fully understand Jesus' reaction to the woman and his actions in this passage. We can come up with reasons but if those reasons try to soften the impact of the text then they are no good. This story is meant to hit us in the guts. We are meant to sit up and take note of it and when we do that, we hear the words 'Kyrie,

eleison', 'Lord have mercy'. That's what makes the difference. The woman was not prepared to accept that the good news of Jesus Christ was limited to one ethnic group, despite the resistance of Jesus Christ, and so she received mercy and all of us here are indebted to her persistence, for Matthew's Gospel ends with Jesus' words; "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations".²

A mother once approached Napoleon seeking a pardon for her son. The emperor replied that the young man had committed a certain offence twice and justice demanded death.

² Matthew 28:19 NRSV

"But I don't ask for justice," the mother explained. "I plead for mercy."

"But your son does not deserve mercy," Napoleon replied.

"Sir," the woman cried, "it would not be mercy if he deserved it, and mercy is all I ask for."

"Well, then," the emperor said, "I will have mercy." And he spared the woman's son.³

That's all the Canaanite woman asked for too. It's all that we ask for as well but of course it is everything in this world and it is

³ Palau, Luis 1984 *Experiencing God's Forgiveness*
New York: Multnomah Press

given only by God. We can only end with Jesus words; “Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.’ And her daughter was healed instantly.”

Amen.