

Holy Spirit Province

PROVINCIAL NEWSLETTER

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OUTSIDERS BECOMING INSIDERS: 20TH SUNDAY YEAR A

Before Covid-19 stopped me in my tracks, I would go to a city church every now and then to get my sins forgiven. Along its street I would regularly come across a homeless man and his dog, plus an upturned cap to collect some help from passers-by. One day I was amazed and inspired when I saw a young woman take out \$20 from her purse and place it in the man's cap. By comparison, I had only a couple of coins to give, and felt ashamed first of all that I was so stingy, and secondly that I was so well off at home - with a roof over my head, a warm bed, and more than enough to eat. Just the same, the poor man looked up, smiled, and said to each of us from his heart: "Thank you very much!"

In the gospel story today, we come across another person begging. But the Canaanite woman of the story is not begging for money, only for a favour. Still looking for a bit of "me time" after endless days and nights of generous service to others, and of verbal attacks from his enemies, Jesus has crossed the border into the pagan (non-Jewish) region of Tyre and Sidon (in today's geography southern Lebanon). Hardly has he arrived, when that local woman comes out screaming at him to cure her sick daughter.

The apostles around Jesus are irritated by her noisy behaviour. For them, she's a pest and a nuisance, and to shut her up as soon as possible, they plead with Jesus to give her what she wants. The reaction of Jesus himself, usually so caring and generous, is a surprise. At first, he ignores her. Next, he says she doesn't qualify for assistance, because, as he puts it, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the House of Israel." But, not put off by this, the woman falls down at his feet, and says simply: "Lord, help me." But still Jesus hesitates. In fact, he attempts to put her off with some quite harsh words: "It is not fair to take the children's food," he says, "and throw it to the dogs." (At that time Jews used to show their contempt for gentiles, non-Jews, by calling them "dogs").

But Jesus was meeting one feisty, desperate, determined and tenacious woman. whose tough love for her troubled daughter was so strong, that she simply wasn't going to take "no" for an answer. (I'm reminded of Dolly Parton singing in response to some male put-down, "... but because I'm blonde, don't think I'm dumb, because this dumb blonde ain't

nobody's fool"!)). Quick as a flash, she matches Jesus with her brilliant quip: "Yes, Lord, yet even the puppy dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table." There and then, her clever answer outwits Jesus, challenges Jewish prejudice against her, and breaks down his defences. He warms to her, and better still, he gives in to her request. "Woman," he says, "great is your faith! Let it be done to you as you wish". As a result, "her daughter was healed instantly" of her troubling illness.

Long before Jesus, as our First Reading reports, the prophet Isaiah had spoken of outsiders, people of other nations, joining God's chosen Jewish people, in coming to the Temple in Jerusalem and praying to God together. In time, then, outsiders would become insiders. But even for Jesus, this would be a new learning experience and a new insight, actually triggered by his encounter with that Canaanite woman. That insight, of outsiders becoming insiders through the grace of God, would deepen in both Jesus himself and his first followers. So much so, that Paul the Apostle would come to strongly assert: "As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:27-28). It makes sense for us, then, to think big about the Church, and to understand and appreciate it as one community of the followers of Jesus, despite all its differences, divisions, disagreements and denominations.

Within the whole human race, and not just within the church of Jesus, the slogan "we're all in this together" has become more and more an apt description as well as a shared aspiration and goal. We see it reflected in the workings of the United Nations Organisation, and of such associated bodies as the World Health Organisation and the International Court of Justice. We see it expressed in bi-lateral and multilateral trade agreements, and in international aid from rich nations to poor ones. We see it happening in such developments as the protest movements "Me Too" and "Black Lives Matter". We see it in joint action for land rights and compensation for dispossessed native peoples. We see it happening also in international efforts to stop the harmful effects of climate change and the degradation of the environment.

The meeting of Jesus with the Canaanite woman tells me something that was true about Jesus the man, and just as true of you and me. Moral consciousness, sensitivity to right and wrong, in one word "conscience", develops over time, and in response to real people and real human situations. How vital it is, then, that in belonging to both the Church and the world, we all remain closely connected! How vital it is also, to keep praying to God, to change our appreciation of other people, and of our love for them, from mere sparks into bright, burning flames!

bgleesoncp@gmail.com