

SHE STROVE WITH GOD

Isaiah 35. 4-7a

James 2. 1-17

Mark 7. 24-37

I speak to you in the name of ✠ the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.
Amen.

In today's appointed gospel reading, our Lord (as you will remember from last week) has just finished a dispute with the Pharisees over ritual cleanliness (Mk 7. 1-23). He now takes his disciples out of Jewish country north into Gentile country, to the region of Tyre, an ancient Phoenician city. Although Jesus wished to be alone, he could not escape notice because his fame preceded him.

A woman who was Greek by culture and Syrophenician by nationality sought him out. There are indications in the original gospel text that she would have been considered a Gentile lady of some status, and that she was a landowner.¹ But she fell at Christ's feet and begged him to cast out a devil, an unclean spirit, from her young daughter. Our Lord's response is uncharacteristically harsh: 'Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs.' By 'children' Jesus means the chosen people of Israel; and by 'dogs' he means the non-Jewish Gentiles. The word that he uses here for dogs means 'little dogs' or even 'puppies';² but it is not flattering to the Gentiles in general nor to the woman in particular.

Surprise! The woman receives Christ's word and turns the tables on him. We might imagine her not moving and remaining physically in position as she makes her retort. 'Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs.' Surprise again! Our Lord immediately (and apparently gladly) capitulates. 'For saying that, you may go –

¹ John R. Donahue. and Daniel J. Harrington, *The Gospel of Mark* (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 2002), p. 233.

² Donahue and Harrington, *Mark*, p. 234.

the demon has left your daughter.’ And when she returns home, the Syrophenician woman finds her daughter healed, lying on the bed.

From there Jesus travels elsewhere into Gentile country, as we heard, and heals a man who was a deaf mute; and the crowd exclaimed, ‘He has done everything well’. But today let us stay with the Syrophenician woman. Interestingly, there is a later, post-New Testament memory of the woman and her daughter in Church tradition; and they even have names: the woman was known as Justa, and her daughter was known as Berenice.³ This may indicate that they became ongoing disciples of Christ.

Amongst other things, what is of importance here is the engagement of the Syrophenician woman with our Lord as she found herself in great need. In this engagement, at least two things are evident. The first is what Jesus considers to be the real issue of cleanliness, which is not the external washing of rituals, but rather the cleansing of the heart and soul. The second (which follows closely) is the crossing of ritual boundaries, through the grace of faith, all through this episode. Christ has gone outside Jewish country into Gentile territory to find rest. A Gentile woman nevertheless finds him, falls down before him and presents her desperate situation. Our Lord puts her off (it would seem in part to test her, since normally he knew full well what he was going to do). In any case, she more than passes the test, and Jesus readily gives her what she asks.⁴

By flipping Christ’s saying about dogs, the Gentile woman shows that she is in fact a true Israelite and a child of the Kingdom, by striving with Christ. The very name, ‘Israel’ was, after all, the new name given to the Patriarch Jacob after he had wrestled all night with an angel of the Lord. To quote the book of Genesis, “Then the man said, “You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed”” (Gen 32. 24-32). ‘Israel’ means ‘he who

³ Pseudo-Clementine *Homilies* 2.19, 3.73.

⁴ In St Matthew’s account of the same story, Jesus praises the woman for her great faith (Mt 15. 21-28).

strives with God', or 'God rules'. The Syrophenician woman in our gospel revealed herself to be a spiritual member of the family. In the end, she was considered as one of the children of Israel, because she strove with God and with man and prevailed.

I find it significant that a reference to this same woman is made in our liturgy of Holy Communion, in the Prayer of Humble Access, when we say: 'We are not worthy so much as to gather up the crumbs under your table. But you are the same Lord whose nature is always to have mercy.' In this brief Eucharistic recollection of this Gentile woman's grappling with our Lord, we are invited to believe that God will show the same grace and mercy to us as he showed to Justa.

As we reflect on this text we might ask ourselves, 'how much are we like Jacob and Justa?' What do we really need from God right now? What blessings do we want him to grant us? And how badly do we want them?

If God is calling us to grapple or wrestle with him, it is not because he is reluctant to bless us (even though we may feel that way). It is because he has more blessings for us *in the wrestling* than without it.

If I may share a personal example, several years ago (and just prior to coming to Guernsey), Claudia suffered a bad fall which resulted in a deep gash to her shin. The wound was very deep, and the people at A&E took good care of her. They stitched her up, covered the gash with bandages and sent her home. As time passed, the wound gradually healed...but not entirely. In fact, it seemed after a while that the wound *would not* fully heal. People and friends who knew about the situation supported us, and prayed. But no complete progress seemed to be made: every time the nurse came to our flat to change Claudia's bandage, she could only say that the wound was not closed.

I confess that I became rather worried about this situation. One morning, as I was preparing for work, it was as if the Lord were saying to me, ‘John, this is *your battle*. *You* are to pray for Claudia’s healing, and *you* are to continue to pray.’

So pray I did. Mightily; frequently; and (almost) continually. After a time, guess what happened? Claudia’s wound closed and was fully healed. As I look back on that period, I can say today God surely blessed us; but he blessed us following a time of serious wrestling.

In our Old Testament example, Jacob wrestled with God all night and emerged with a new identity. He, who had previously stolen his father Isaac’s blessing from Esau by deception, received a new blessing from God by prevailing with God by faith.

In our New Testament example, Justa, a Syrophenician and Gentile woman, refused to believe that she was second-rate and dared to have faith that God’s grace, mercy, salvation and healing were also extended to her.

If we have the impression that God is calling us to wrestle with him, let us not give up. Let us not let go of God until he blesses us. He loves to bless those who have tenacious faith; they come out of that divine wrestling match transformed.

Amen.