

**Sunday 16<sup>th</sup> August 2020**  
**Sermon by Janice Atfield**

**A prayer of Approach**

Lord God, as we come before you now,  
we open our hearts to you.  
Help us to see that we can learn so much from others,  
even from those with whom we think  
we may not share much in common.  
Make us willing to stand out from the crowd,  
to hear your voice, and act upon it. **Amen.**

**A prayer of Praise and Thanksgiving**

Living Lord,  
we praise you that you are a God who loves.  
You have given us a marvellous world,  
to live in and to share with all your people.  
You, O God, love everyone equally,  
and we thank you that we are each unique.  
We thank you that each one of us  
has so much to give – and to receive – from each other.  
Thank you for each new experience that you give us. **Amen.**

**Read Matthew Chapter 15: 21-28**

**Sermon by Janice Atfield**

My six-year-old grand-daughter, Mia loves the story of Rapunzel. Her mum sent me a video of her acting out the story with a pathetic strand of yellow wool clipped into her hair. – Nanna to the rescue! I made her a big, thick woollen plait which reached down to the floor and she was delighted. She wore it everywhere: - to the shops, to her friends’ – she even wanted to wear it for school, back in those heady days when she could go to school, although she was talked out of that one, but it did mean that every time we met, her first words were, “Nanna, let’s play Rapunzel!” Oh, how boring it got. She was the star of the show, and I took on all the supporting roles: the witch, the prince, the horse. Each time I stepped out of character, a cross little voice descended from on high:- “Nanna, they don’t do that:- do it properly!”

In the beginning was the word and the word became flesh and had to learn how to do it properly: and the one who taught the word how to be an authentic, card-carrying human being was a pushy pagan woman from Phoenicia.

This passage is difficult, but it is much easier to deal with if we accept it. Jesus was rude: he was curt and unsympathetic. He was mistaken in what he thought that the role of the Messiah entailed. Let's not make excuses for him, by suggesting that his words were delivered with a wry little smile of encouragement, or that he used a cute, fluffy word for "dog". This was not an attempt to draw out the woman's faith, but to get her to clear off and leave him and his mission to the Children of Israel in peace.

And we can do this with a steady eye because Jesus was human and utterly exhausted. Over the past few days, he had tried to find some peace and quiet by setting sail in a boat, only to be called back to feed 5,000 people. He had cured many who had asked for his help and now, just as he thought he had an opportunity for a rest, this wretched woman came banging on the door.

But, by the end of his encounter with her, his whole perception of what it was to be human had changed and he finally understood what his Father had sent him to do.

So, what exactly had this foreign woman shown him? She taught him not to feel sorry for himself. His whole manner towards her was to say:- "I'm spent, utterly tired. I've nothing left in me to give you": and it is as if she looked him in the eye and said:- "So am I. Jesus, Lord, Son of David. Here you are – an educated man, travelling around with a bunch of followers ready to act as your bodyguards when you have had enough. Who is caring for your mother and family, while you fulfil your mission? My sick daughter needs me all the time: there is no respite for me and thousands like me – caring, laying down our lives, propping our tired eyes open with matchsticks in order to care for those who cannot look after themselves".

And while Jesus was taking that one on the chin, she continued – "You will learn that nothing in life is within your control: you plan your life, but it doesn't turn out as you expected: if fate doesn't get you, the behaviour and prejudices of others will – as you will no doubt come to realise as you set your face towards Jerusalem". And finally she sighed and made herself ready to be shown the door, but added: "So, who is the most like God, Jesus, Lord, Son of David: - you or me?"

And so Jesus learned his lesson and the woman's daughter was healed. He declared that this happened because of her great faith. But her faith was not the same thing as her persistence: it was that she was prepared to let Jesus experience her world-view – see things through her eyes, and as a result Jesus understood his mission: that it was not just to the Children of Israel, but to humanity as a whole and that while he only saw reality from

his own standpoint, he could never be the bearer of salvation as God, the Father wanted him to be.

And it is still the case today that God learns what it is like to be human at each individual's invitation. Every time a new human being is born, God runs the great experiment again: each life is part of the great picture that God is compiling of what it is to be human. But God will only do so with our consent. This is not the Christian version of "The Invasion of the Body Snatchers": God has given us selves that are our own possession, our own sanctuary, our own private business – and yet so many of us yearn for relationship – with someone we feel intuitively is within us, just waiting for us to say YES. We will find that we have to give this consent over and over again – at the beginning of every heart-beat with the cry: "Lord, Son of David, have mercy upon me".

But in this consent lies abundant life in terms of all the metaphors the gospels have to offer: - the narrow door, the second birth, the living water. It all begins from here: - "Come in, Jesus, welcome to my world and make it yours".

### **A prayer for others**

The Canaanite woman sought your help.

She loved her daughter so much, she was so desperately in need, that she wouldn't give up till she had her answer.

Lord, may we learn from this woman, to wait on you expectantly, patiently, persistently, doggedly.

Grant us the courage of our convictions when we truly believe we are doing your will.

We pray today for those who feel excluded, whatever their situation, whatever the reason: for prisoners, refugees, the homeless;

for the sick, the mentally unstable; for any who feel that they are outsiders.

We pray for ourselves when our faith is weak, or we feel that we don't belong. **Amen.**

### **A personal prayer**

Lord, the Pharisees were offended by your words.

You could have been offended by the Canaanite woman's words.

I ask that, as I go about my business, I will take the time to consider each person I meet as unique, special to you, and worthy of my listening ear.

May I not be offended just because something is out of my comfort zone. **Amen.**