

20A

We remember last Sunday Peter, while sinking beneath the waves, was chided by Jesus for his lack of faith. Today, in contrast, He praises the Canaanite woman for her persistence. Last Sunday Jesus invited Peter on to the turbulent waters of the Sea of Galilee, today in contrast, He seems to ignore the woman altogether and keep her at bay. Jesus takes quite a different approach towards these two people but his objective is the same – to put their faith in Him to the test.

The Canaanite woman, I believe, stands for all those whose prayers seem to come up against a stone wall. Even though pressed by his apostles, Jesus seems strangely uninterested in the woman's request. But she's not put off so easily.

There was an article not long ago in a national newspaper about aspects of the life of Mother Theresa of Calcutta (now a saint). During her life as a nun God seemed to have 'blanked her out' over lengthy periods of time. It even crossed her mind to leave the convent. This only came out after her death. Like the Canaanite in today's gospel her prayers seemed to have gone unheeded. Her life as a nun was very far removed from the 'sweetness and light' image that we sometimes get of her. Despite all this she hung on doggedly to her faith and never eased up on her heroic charity work among the poor.

It appears to me that the closer we're drawn to God, the more distant He might appear. But there must be a good reason for this. Of course, in reality, God is anything but distant from us. Without Him we would cease to exist. As we say in the preface of the Mass 'in Him we live and move and have our being'.

When he puts off answering us, it must be in our best interests. It's like when a woman is pursued by a lover, she often plays

'hard to get' and deliberately 'keeps him at arm's length'. If he loves her, he won't be so easily put off. The Canaanite woman is initially frozen out by Jesus, but the story shows that her faith in Him was not based on a whim. She pursues him even more.

But the same happened to Jesus himself while on the Cross. He felt that even His Father had deserted Him when He needed Him the most. He cries out the words of Pslam 22: 'my God my God why have you forsaken me' but this anguished cry only leads to a deeper trust when he says just before he died 'into your hands I commit my spirit'. Faith is not based on fanciful feelings but on a dogged fidelity to the will of God.

Yes, we may have pressing needs to pray about – remember the woman's prayer was that a devil would leave her daughter. Who could argue with that request? But her request is merely being put on hold so that her faith matures. Jesus then commends her for her steadfastness and meets her demand.

But if we fail the faith test, like Peter did last Sunday, I'm sure God will give us plenty more opportunities to prove our loyalty, provided we haven't, in the meantime, given up on Him.

In the realm of faith the Canaanite woman has a great deal to teach us provided we're willing to listen and learn.
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