



Sermon: - 29th May 2016

Be Audacious

A psychology professor at the University of Miami knew his students expected a terrifyingly long final exam. He thought he would play with their minds a little (well, what do you expect from a psychology professor?) and so he only put ONE question on the final exam.

He watched the reactions of the students as they all opened the exams and saw the one question. Initially they all looked relieved, but as the difficulty of the question began to sink in, the relief became confusion and consternation. For all the students except one! He read the question, tapped his pencil into his palm a few times, then jotted something down on the test paper. He walked up to the professor, handed him the final paper, and walked out. The professor blinked in surprise, looked at what the student wrote, and smiled. The professor wrote "100%" on the top of that student's test.

The question: *What is courage?*

The student's answer: *This is.*

What is courage? I think the Syrophenician woman was courageous, but then love and anxiety for our children may make heroes of us all.

She was a desperate woman. Her daughter was sick, afflicted by some strange condition, her mother thought she was possessed by a demon, possibly going to die.

She was a determined woman. She believed that Jesus could heal her daughter and she was not going to leave him alone until he did.

In first century Jewish society, she was beyond the pale. She was a woman in a culture where women didn't matter. She was a foreigner to Jesus whose culture had very strict rules of behaviour, in which contact with outsiders, those who were not Jews, compromised the purity and cleanliness of the Jews, where foreigners were to be avoided, were low on the social scale. A woman ... and a foreigner ... she was less than nothing in Jewish eyes.

Perhaps nothing less than her overwhelming love for her daughter, her overwhelming fear for her daughter, could have given her the courage to confront Jesus and make this daring request.

And so she braved the displeasure of the crowd, who watched astonished as this woman of no account dared to approach Jesus.

She braved the possibility of rejection by Jesus who answered her unusually dismissively. And isn't that a surprise. Where was the compassion that we are used to seeing him show to those in need? Where was the grace with which he usually responded when the helpless came to him for help? When Jesus is approached by strangers, as the gospels tell us he is, time and time again, his responses can be provocative. They can be challenging. They can be enigmatic. But they are never dismissive – until now.

Here we have this brave, desperate, determined woman, and a Jesus that we don't recognise from other pictures in the gospel, apparently hard, uncompromising and indifferent.

So what are we to make of this unusual little cameo? What signal was Jesus was giving to his listeners then, and what does it mean for us today?

The words of Jesus seem harsh to us. "First let the children eat all they want," he told her, "for it is not right to take the children's bread and toss it to their dogs."

I don't know about you, but in the past when I have heard this story I have assumed that the dog referred to was one of the unclean animals which roamed the streets, scavengers, as in many eastern countries they still are today. Perhaps we visualise some scrawny and flea ridden animal, raking amongst the rubbish for food. To compare the woman to an animal such as this would be deeply insulting. Did Jesus really say that? But the words Jesus used were not as harsh as they at first appear.

The word that Jesus uses for "dog" in this passage is an affectionate diminutive used of a household pet. He was not comparing her to the unclean foragers on the streets; he was actually comparing her to the loved and cared for pet which would in fact be the children's playmate.

But although his words may not have as been shocking as they first appear, they were still harsh. He was denying her the help that she so desperately wanted. But then, Jesus often tests the faith of those who come to him seeking help. Jesus will offer help when asked, but it is rarely offered without some expectation of effort on the part of the supplicant.

The lame man by the pool had to take up his bed and walk.

The ten lepers had to go and show themselves to the priests.

The woman with the haemorrhage of blood had to confess what she had done before the crowd. And often, only after he has pushed and prodded and tested, does he then say "Your faith has made you well". Grace may be free, but it is not cheap, and it requires from us a response and a determination to be faithful.

So he makes her work for what she wants. How badly does this matter to her? Will she persevere? Or will his harshness scare her off? But she is ready with the comeback that proves her determination and her faith. "Yes, Lord," she replied, "but even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs."

This profound answer, and Jesus' response, gives us many clues as to the meaning behind Jesus' behaviour in this incident.

Jesus is for the Jews, but he is for the Gentiles too. He came first to the Jews, but he will care for all of humanity. He will not hold back from those who truly seek him out. In a sense, he was making the point forcefully in the way he dealt with her. He confronts her with the truth that he has come for the Jews. Her response enables him to declare before this crowd that he is willing to expand the boundaries of his kingdom to everyone who comes seeking him. The letter of James reminds us that God has no favourites. The letter of James reminds us that we should have no favourites. Not that we don't feel more strongly for some people than we do for others, but that we should treat everyone equally regardless of their status or standing. And regardless of whether we like them or not.

For example, how would we react if either of these folk, a punk, or a tramp, showed up in church one Sunday?

This little interchange is significant as it highlights Jesus' mission to the whole of humanity not just the Jews.

The woman's refusal to be dismissed is significant also, and this too is in concert with much of the gospels. She will not leave without the answer that she wants, and her faith is rewarded. So the lame man who had lain by the pool for 38 years finds his patience rewarded as Jesus heals him. Jesus tells the parable of the friend at midnight, who harassed his neighbour when unexpected guests arrived and he had no food until the neighbour got up to give him a loaf of bread. And also the parable of the woman who pestered the judge until she was given the justice she was seeking.

Persistence then is good. How badly do you want this? How long are you prepared to make the effort to pray? And to go on praying? Does this really matter to you? Are you going to be deflected by distractions, by wrong turnings, or will you persevere towards your goal?

And thirdly, the significance of this little interchange is that I think God responds well to us when we are audacious in prayer. This woman had no right to ask for what she did, and she knew it. If she had felt justified in her request she would have been offended by Jesus' response. But she knows that this is a bold step that she is taking, and having made the decision to take it she carries it through to the end. She is determined that she will be answered. In James 4 v 2, we read "You do not have because you do not ask God". This Syrophenician woman was determined to ask, and to go on asking until her prayer was answered. Perhaps she was like a dog which won't let go of a bone, but she was rewarded, and her daughter was made well. She risked rejection, she risked the displeasure of the crowd, she risked the failure of her hopes and the disappointment of her dreams. Yet she took the risk and in that found herself vindicated.

Her example to us is to take a risk.

Do you know that you took a risk this morning? We all took a risk in coming to church today. What I mean by that is that we took a risk in being audacious enough to come into the presence of the living God, who holds the whole world in his hands. Yet our holy and magnificent God, the King and Lord of all actually welcomes us into his presence. Through Jesus we can be bold to approach the throne of grace, we can be audacious in coming into the presence of the one who created all things, who created us, because he invites us, he loves us, and he wants us here.

So pray, audaciously, and come audaciously our gracious and loving God welcomes you.

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