



HOMILY by Father Robbie Low

## **20<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time – Year A**

### ***Outrageous Behaviour***

*Readings: Isaiah 56: 1, 6-7, Ps 44, Romans 11: 12-15, 29-32, Matthew 15: 21-28*

In most walks of life there are times when you just need to 'get away'. To be far from the insistent buzz of the telephone with its unquenchable demands, from the trivial to the tragic, unleashed upon the unsuspecting psyche of the priest or doctor or responsible professional. There is only so much that you can give and you can only give that if you are in regular touch with the source of all that is. I remember, many years ago, on holiday in Turkey, hearing the door slam on our neighbour's apartment, newly arrived. A woman's voice shouted at, presumably, her husband and I edit the tirade for delicate ears: 'You complete (censored) idiot. You told that man that I was a (censored) doctor. He will tell everybody else. What kind of (censored) holiday do you think I will get now. Every (censored) ailment on the site will be queuing up for my attention' and so it raged on.

I am not equating Our Lord with the potty mouthed doctor but there are overlaps here in a common humanity. Jesus has got out of the country after a hectic and exhausting time. He is abroad – Tyre and Sidon – pagan territory. You might think that He would be safe from all pastoral demands

here. He is on holiday. Not a bit of it.

Out of nowhere this Canaanite woman appears badgering Him for help. Hanging round the pool at cocktail hour, waiting in the foyer of the hotel for when He comes out.

Her beef is simple. She has a daughter possessed by a demon and she wants exorcism. We are not told how or why this child is thus afflicted but it is not uncommon for pagan worship to result in this affliction. So it may be down to the mother's own religious practices. We don't know.

Jesus doesn't acknowledge her or give her the dignity of a reply. He totally ignores her, as she calls Him out by His royal title and makes sure everybody else knows that He is in town. So much for the holiday, the peace, the respite, the relaxation, the refuelling, the healing silence of days apart from the ministerial load.

Even the disciples are minded to intervene on her side, if only for peace and quiet. 'Give her what she wants, Lord, and then she'll go away'. Jesus then embarks on what nowadays, in our age of acute verbal sensitivity and consequent synthetic rage, would constitute grounds for a 'hate crime'. He issues two responses, one to His disciples and, eventually, one to the woman which, according to 'wokery', would constitute racism and misogyny.

He announces that His primary ministry is to His own people – implication .....no foreigners.

Undeterred by this dismissal the woman falls at His feet and begs Him, 'Lord. Help me'. And Jesus replies with the withering rebuke – 'the food is for the children not for the dogs'. He equates this woman with a dog. The modern translators 'pretty it up' by offering 'house dogs' ie pets but a dog is still a dog. In this case just like a dog with a bone that will not let go. You can hear the modern guardians of correct speech screaming like the Furies but.....we should ignore their carefully confected rage. Jesus' provocative language and demeanour draws ever deeper response from the seeking soul.

She greets Him initially with His royal title – as the heir of Davidic kingship – the ancient enemy and conqueror of her own people. Ignored, she falls at His feet and worships Him as Lord. He dismisses her as a dog. She responds that even the dogs get the crumbs that fall from the Master's table. Her plea for divine compassion is to The King, The Lord, The Master of all. It is a pretty comprehensive statement of Faith and Jesus responds to her faith, her resilience, her persistence, her humility, her ready and disarming wit, her indefatigable 'bounce-back' and her indomitable hope and trust. He draws out of this remarkable woman and their historic encounter the depths of compassion of the divine even when the human has had enough and the glorious resolution of the simplicity of persistent prayer and confidence in God's mercy in Jesus.

What a great prayer, 'LORD, HELP ME!'

If Jesus had not been so rude and simply made an initial anodyne response how much poorer the Gospel would have been, bereft of this passionate, provocative and beautiful encounter and the powerful faith of this remarkable, resilient and determined woman.

