



Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost

Sermon by Revd Sharmain James



Sunday 20 August 2023

READINGS

Genesis 45:1-15; Psalm 133; Romans 11:1-2a,29-32; Matthew 15:21-28

We are not worthy so much as to gather up the crumbs

Loving God open our ears to your life, living Word and focus our minds on the message you intend for us so we may faithfully discern your way. Amen.

“ We do not presume to come to this your table, merciful Lord, trusting in our own righteousness, but in your manifold and great mercies. We are not worthy so much as to gather up the crumbs under your table”.

Do you recognise these words? It's the prayer of humble access. The Prayer of Humble Access is our prayer we pray just before we are invited to approach the Lord's Table, to receive Communion. This prayer dates back to 1548, when Archbishop Cranmer first wrote the Book of Common Prayer and, of course, we continue to use it now in our Worship service. However some people, not specifically here but more generally, don't like praying these words. The words “we are not worthy so much as to gather up the crumbs under your Table” don't line up well with the type of modern theology that seeks only to affirm the inner goodness of humanity, and leaves no room for the brokenness which is at the very heart of our fallen human condition. In some Anglican churches – they consider this prayer as optional. But like all good liturgy this prayer does not come out of nowhere but is based on scripture. One of the places this prayer draws its imagery from is found in the Gospel reading we read this morning about a Canaanite woman who approached Jesus and asked for His help because her daughter was possessed by a demon.

In this passage, Jesus and His disciples had departed “into the coasts of Tyre and Sidon” which is inhabited mainly by gentiles. They have travelled there after a bitter debate with the Pharisees in Galilee - about Jesus' disciples neglecting to wash their hands – before they eat. Jesus also had to deal with the disciples lack of understanding or perhaps their shock over his declaration that nothing that passed their lips was unclean, it was what was in their hearts that was more likely to be unclean. But I think that some of them just didn't get the message. One can only speculate that some interesting discussions might have taken place on that long journey to the Phoenician coast.

While there, Jesus is confronted by a Canaanite woman which, if we remember from Hebrew Scriptures, makes her the ultimate outsider. She is a long way from being worthy to speak to a Jewish man, let alone a healer and teacher. But, as we know - when people are desperate, especially if there are concerned for their children, they will do anything,

This nameless woman – comes to Jesus, begging him to heal her daughter. She comes to Jesus like all those people who drew such sympathy from Jesus in the last chapter. The ones he looked upon with compassion and said that they were like sheep without a shepherd. And not being Hebrew, she knows nothing of Jewish purity laws, nor has she any tie to them. Although there was no reason to think Jesus would help her. She came to Jesus because he was her last hope. But the passage reveals that Jesus “answered her not a word”. Puzzled by Jesus silence – the disciples asked Him to “send her away. Because she was bothering them with her persistent begging. They showed no compassion for her or sensitivity to her needs.

When Jesus finally spoke, His words were not the comforting response we’ve come to expect, but instead “He answered and said, “ ‘I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” But the passage tells us that she came, and she worshipped Him. She fell down in front of Jesus and pleaded again: - Lord, help me. But He answered and said, “ it is not right to take the children’s bread and toss it to the dogs.” Once again, where we see only insult and rejection, the Canaanite woman is not put off. She sees an opportunity, and in her words, we recognize the prayer of humble access. “Even the dogs eat the crumbs that falls from their masters table. ” This humble response reveals that she understood that she approached our Lord in complete poverty. She came before Him with empty hands. She came as an unworthy, undeserving, enemy of God and His people, and therefore her argument was not based on her own merit, but only on His mercy. Matthew shows us that it was her persistent, faithful, humble cry that gained her access to God and to the healing of her daughter.

So just like the Canaanite woman we, too, must come before God – in poverty - holding out our empty hands before him, staking our hope on the richness of His mercy and not on any claim we think we’ve earned the right to make. The healing of the Canaanite woman’s daughter, and the Prayer of Humble Access that flows directly from today’s gospel from Matthew - and other passages of Scripture, reveal the truth that when we approach Christ in humility, we gain access to God. When we stop “trusting in our own righteousness,” we then position ourselves to rely only on His “manifold and great mercies.” When we acknowledge the fact that “we are not worthy so much as to gather up the crumbs under your Table,” we then depend entirely on the Lamb who is worthy, who feeds us not with crumbs, but with the Bread of Heaven.

The Prayer of Humble Access can be a great help in centering our hearts and minds on what is truly important, that God will not withhold from us, sinners though we are, that of which we are most in need – his son, Jesus Christ.

This prayer is not intended to be demeaning. Instead, It sums up our state of unworthiness due to our sinfulness. But it also reminds us that God will NOT leave us in such a state nor hold it against us. We are freely given the riches of salvation won for us through Jesus’ death and resurrection. They are ours for the asking. And God repeats his generosity to us through the gifts of bread and wine, which we receive from his table. They are ours for taking, “so that we may evermore dwell in him and he in us.”

Amen