

Almighty God,
whose only Son has opened for us
a new and living way into your presence:
give us pure hearts and steadfast wills
to worship you in spirit and truth.

Our text may be found in today's gospel from Mark, chapter 7 and verse 28:

'Sir even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs.'

Do you have favourites ? I guess we all must. Making distinctions, preferring one thing to another, liking some people more than others, surely this is part of what it is to be human ? One of the problems being a teacher is that inevitably some pupils are going to be nicer than others and that inevitably teachers like some students more than others. As a young teacher, talking through the issue with a friend who started teaching at the same time as me, I was impressed by his solution - he simply said 'all my pupils are my favourites'.

Favouritism of a different sort is the subject of the first half of today's Epistle from James. Here James, concerned as much for what people did, as much for what they believed, concerned that faith should find positive expression in action, accuses some Christians of favouritism, favouring the rich more than the poor; treating the rich with deference, the poor with indifference; inviting the rich to sit

in the best seats in church and letting the poor stand up at the back. The only people who have to stand up here at St Bart's are those who arrive late at our Carol service !

But today, as my text suggests, **'Sir even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs'**, I'd like to turn our attention to an old favourite of mine, the healing of the Syro-Phoenician woman's daughter. You all know the story and since you've only just heard it again, it must be fresh in your mind. But let me remind you anyway: Jesus is taking time out abroad with his disciples when he's pestered by a foreigner who wants him to heal her daughter. There's a sharp exchange about who Jesus is actually there for but the woman's faith in him, her desire that her daughter should be well again by him and her persistence in pursuing him are rewarded by Jesus with the promise of the cure she is so earnestly seeks.

So why do I like the story so much ? Three reasons I guess.

Firstly, it's a miracle of healing that I must first have heard when I was a boy at Primary School, a story that over the past 63 years I've heard and read many times. Familiarity breeds **content!**

Secondly, I admire the woman who exemplifies what it is to be a loving mother. She is prepared to go to considerable lengths to secure the cure her daughter needs. She's heard of Jesus. She knows he's nearby. She goes to see him. Now it's not easy for a foreign woman to speak to a Jewish Rabbi – don't ask why (!) –

but I remember at School, a visiting Orthodox Rabbi being very uneasy that my Head Mistress offered to shake hands with him before an assembly. And Jesus for whatever reason is not encouraging, you might even say positively discouraging but despite the apparent cold-shoulder, she persists. Now she's not rude exactly but she takes Jesus' point and turns it on its head in a polite and practical way that is perfectly true and bingo! result ! Jesus states that the woman's faith, expressed in what she has said, means that her daughter, even as he speaks, is okay.

Lastly, the mention of dogs. Dogs don't usually get a great press in the Bible. The Hebrew word for dog is, 'keleb', the Greek 'κυων' (kuon). Mostly they are curs, pariahs, stray dogs rather than pets. There are particularly unpleasant references to dogs returning to their vomit (Proverbs 26 v11) or licking the sores on the body of the beggar at the rich man's gate (Luke 16 v21). I love the sharp observation in Ecclesiastes (9 v4) - **'better to be a live dog than a dead lion'** and in the apocryphal book of Tobit, the archangel Raphael has a rather nice dog that he takes with him on his journey with Tobias to Ecbatana. Here, however, the Greek word that Mark uses - κυναριον (kunarion) is a little dog, a family pet who would sit at the family's feet and snaffle any food that should fall the floor. So perhaps here where Jesus suggests all foreigners are dogs, he's not being quite so rude as it sounds - at least the dogs in question are pets !

So I like the story of the Syro-Phoenician woman's daughter. It's a favourite of mine because it exemplifies a mother's love and it tells us quite clearly that Jesus,

the Jewish Messiah, is there for all of us not just the God's Chosen people the Jews.

I have spoken in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,
Amen.

Preached at the Eucharist

St Bartholomew's, Dinard

9th September, 2012

H: Sermon 26 : Favourites

