**SIXTEENTH SUNDAY after PENTECOST - Mark 7. 24-37 - 9 September 2018**

When the forty year Exodus ended in Gentile Canaan, now modern Lebanon, leader Joshua commanded that the people be utterly destroyed [Deut. 7.2]. Thank God, this order was not carried out until in our lifetimes.

In today’s Gospel, a second Joshua, Yeshua, translated as Jesus, led his team there. They had been exasperated at the animosity of nit-picking Pharisees in the south, who held that human rules were the essence of true religion.

“Come away to a quiet place,” called Jesus, “You’re all exhausted from evangelical missions. Let’s rest awhile and find peace and solitude for a space.

But, the best laid plans of mice or Saviours gang awry. Jesus, the apprentice Messiah, through meeting with a phenomenal woman, will grow in fuller awareness of his boundary-breaking call.

In the small town market, the woman possibly saw the thirteen Jews haggling over Jewfish or Jerusalem artichokes. Possibly, too, she had heard that someone called Jesus had cured the Gadarene maniac enchained in the tombs nearby. In the absence of an electric power-grid, a tallow lamp lit up her fertile brain. If the miracle-working Messiah had delivered that howling demoniac from a legion of demons, surely he could free her daughter from one teensy weeny unclean spirit, who may have caused her daughter to act violently and do self-harm.

A strait-laced Jewish woman was forbidden to make any direct appeal to a strange man unchaperoned. But, this mother would place herself in front of a speeding chariot, if there were no bulldozers handy, to beg assistance for her beloved child. So, the frantic, desperate, heart-broken woman actually shrieked for help.

But, where she was itching, good Jew Jesus, wasn’t yet scratching. Wrestling with God’s holy dream in his public ministry, he was still a novice, hidebound to his prior mal-formation. To get God’s kingdom going, would he restrict the Good News of salvation only to his fellow narrow circle of Jewry, as the Torah taught that the Chosen People were to be the sole receivers of God’s messianic promise? Or, would he extend his God-given mission and vision to all folk from Day-1?

And, here was this woman outsider threatening to destroy his B & B down time. Jesus was so worn out thinking, “Should I shoo her away like a bothersome blow-fly,” when James high-fived with John and called “Smack her down, Lord? Who let the dog in?”

At first, Jewish Jesus seemed oddly, uncharacteristically insensitive, so wearied, he let slip “Let the children be fed first, for it’s not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.” Surely, Christ was not caught with his compassion down by slamming the door of hope on a mother in need, because she came from the wrong race?

Did the shaken woman reach for a carrier pigeon to carry her complaint to Slater and Gordon? The damages for offensive canine insult should pay off her mortgage. Not a bit. The woman had a quick mind and a quick wit. Did she sense a smile on the speaker’s lips? Did she catch a playful gleam in his eye? She certainly sensed that the word he used for ‘dog’ was a teasing banter. Jesus chose the word for a cute cuddly puppy, a beloved lapdog, a part of the family.

At once, she saw in Jesus, a kindly person, who was trying to clamber out from his life-long bad teaching by Jewry. She saw a sympathetic Jew trying to prise open his mental door on its hinge. And, with sunny heartedness, this wonder woman, this irrepressibly effervescent soul, saw no racial slur in his ill-chosen words. Indeed, she played with him, and turned his dog metaphor to her advantage.

This far, she had doggedly helped her “puppy-dog-eyed” daughter. Now, dog-tired, her bull-dog jaws held on tenaciously, expectantly, to Jesus for a puppy’s portion of the children’s food. “Sir,” she said, “Even the pet puppies, who are as cute as my daughter, even they get the scraps that drop as doggy tit-bits from the banquet table. A mere crumb from your hand, Jesus, will suffice for my daughter, and none of your children of Israel will be the loser.”

This marvellous woman was not finished. Fifteen hundred years on, she spoke again, this time to Archbishop Thomas Cranmer. She gave him the comforting words we shall shortly say as part of the rich heritage of Anglican spirituality, to encourage our frequent reception of the holy sacrament: “We do not presume to come to your table, merciful Lord… to gather up the crumbs under your table.”

And, what of Jesus? At the power of her insight, at her true-hearted sincerity, at her humble perseverance, Jesus realized the mother had come out “top dog” in the banter blather. Now, he saw that the Kingdom of God had broken through in a most extraordinary way to a most extraordinary soul.

He shook his head in utter disbelief: how could this marvellous woman have such indomitable faith, which had grown with his, as they made contact with one another? This woman had prized open his spacious heart and mind to give the circle of God’s grace a much wider circumference, and he answered her faith, saying, “The demon has left your daughter. Because of you, her mother, I know now that people must have priority over outworn systems.”

This woman stands for our largely Gentile world, which, despite the removal of teaching religious education in our schools, still finds the need to call me back as chaplain. This woman stands for our Aboriginal mothers and aunties, and for many of our own, who are tormented by the knowledge that their children are by alcoholic and substance demons.

This woman stands for those overseas, who call out the Harvey Weinbergs and those closer home, who call out the rebuff and lack of respect done women in the parliamentary political asylums of our land.

In 1707, Isaac Watts hymned “Alas! and did my saviour bleed? And did my Sovereign die? Would he devote that sacred head for such a worm as I?” Unlike the woman at Jesus’ apparent be-littling her, nice Anglicans were insulted at being called “a worm,” and settled for a space “for a sinner such as I.” But this was still too offensive and was sanitized to “for such a one as I.”

We could all learn from the woman’s one-person protest, a woman of invincible persistence, whose faith in Jesus came to exceed that of the people he had come to save, an unconquerable belief that Jesus was her only hope. If you had her faith and hope and love, you, too, could be like a dog with two tails. Woof!