

“Lord have mercy on me” she said.

On the 4th of August this year, we witnessed the destruction of Beirut's port and half of its city. It is recorded as the third most powerful explosion ever.

I'm sure that we were all dismayed at the explosion in Lebanon. 2700 tons of ammonium nitrate is said to have been the cause.

150 so far reported dead – no doubt this number will rise. \$15 billion total recovery cost.

It was horrific to see the impact of the explosion. That their port in Beirut was blown to smithereens, in seconds.

A country already on their knees crying out for help.

I share this today because, ironically, our gospel reading today is focused on the region of Tyre and Sidon. These ancient cities are found in modern Lebanon, situated on the Mediterranean coast.

The land was called Phoenicia. Tyre is located about 14 miles north of the current Israeli-Lebanese border, and Sidon is located about 20 miles north of Tyre. So, this story is located in the heart of what we call Lebanon today.

We are simply told that Jesus withdrew to this region. He walked on their soil (Matthew 15:21). He ministered to them: crowds from Tyre and Sidon came to see and listen to Him (Mark 3:7–8). Today Jesus is helping a Syrophenician woman and commending her faith (Matthew 15:21–28).

In the OT we have Jonah being commissioned to go to Joppa, a Canaanite city also on the Mediterranean coast and he had big issues in going to this city, but God wanted to have compassion on the people of this city and Jonah was God's man.

God's mission is not defined by borders, race, colour or creed. The Kingdom of God is for all people of every generation.

Our story teaches us today that the Spirit of Jesus moves in unexpected ways to unexpected people.

What was it about this woman, that Jesus loved?

What are her undeniable characteristics?

Firstly, she was a woman of love.

She made the misery of her child her own. Pagan in the eyes of the Jews, she might be. She would have been a proud Phoenician, who were ancient enemies of Israel, but she was a woman whose life was marked by love.

In her heart there was a deep love for her child, a love which would make her cross boundaries and seek help wherever possible. She must have heard of Christ and was attracted to his ministry. She may well have heard that this Jesus had healed children, even raised dead children.

She wasn't going to miss her opportunity and so she throws herself at the feet of Christ.

Lord, help me. Have mercy on me. My daughter is suffering terribly.

This is a cry of love and if you enter the story, you can feel her pain and anguish and perhaps, you as a parent can identify with this woman.

Maybe you are there today. And you are also crying out, *“Lord Son of David, Have mercy on me!”*.

Notice that she is giving Jesus the Israeli title...*Son of David*. She recognizes Christ's identity as an Israelite, ancient enemies of Phoenicia, and yet love forces her to forget the past and concentrate on the present. Her daughter is more important than past issues.

Willie Barclay writes, *“It was love that made her approach the stranger. It was love that made her accept his silence and yet still appeal; It was love that made her suffer the apparent rebuffs; it was love that made her able to see the compassion beyond and behind the words of Jesus. The driving force of this woman's heart was love; and there is nothing stronger and nothing nearer God than this very thing”*.

Secondly, what Jesus notices about her is her great faith. He said, *“Woman you have great faith”*.

Notice that it was a faith that grew in her encounter with Jesus. It began by her pleading, *have mercy on me son of David*. A term that gave him his earthly position, a title for a man who was doing great things for his nation. He was a son of Israel. But as the encounter develops so does her understanding of who Jesus is.

This story is about Jesus compelling her to enter into this engaging relationship with himself.

But this was not just for the woman's benefit or indeed her daughter's. This was for the benefit of the disciples and for subsequent church mission.

The disciples again were on a learning mission on how to reach those outside of Israel.

Through her encounter with Christ, she was to see in Jesus something more than a great man, she was to come to know him as Lord. She ended up by saying... *Lord, help me!*

Jesus wanted to unlock her faith, to release her faith, so that she would come to a full understanding of Christ.

This story is about a personal journey of faith.

She was on a journey and in a few moments her journey had been transformed. Not only did she receive her daughter completely healed, but her eyes were also opened, and she saw Christ in his divinity as Lord of all.

Like another woman in Samaria, she could now say, *come and see the man who told me everything.*

This story tells us that times of trouble can bring us closer to God. Times of pain can force us to our knees and see God in his mercy in a new way. When trouble comes, as it does at some point for us all, don't let it separate us from the love of God, rather allow it to take us closer to God and to know him as Lord.

Thirdly, this Phoenician woman is remarkable in that she was a woman of great persistence. She teaches us how to pray persistently. Her prayer is not lengthy but honest, sincere, and to the point. She knows what she wants. Her daughter to be healed. This has been her prayer for many days, weeks, months. Perhaps praying for this exact moment, when suddenly she feels as though she has entered into God's immediate presence.

The disciples tried to stop her coming to Jesus. Just as they tried to stop children coming to Jesus because they were too noisy. So, they try to quieten her also. They were good at turning people away from Jesus. The disciples said to Jesus, Send her away, for she keeps calling out to us.

Shocking isn't it!

That they would want to send a hurting mother away from Jesus. Yes, they were trying to protect him, but they didn't understand his mission on earth, to heal the broken hearted.

It's a challenge for us also in our churches; who have we turned away because they don't fit in with our understanding of who should come to Jesus? I wonder how many people have stopped coming to Church or feel inhibited in coming because of the attitudes of others.

Well, this is certainly the case in this story.

Send her away, she is causing us a problem.

But she didn't let others stand in her way, rather she cried all the louder. Her persistence was admirable and I'm sure that Jesus noticed this.

Prayer for her was no ritual, it was the outpouring of a passionate desire of her soul and she felt she must not, need not, take no for an answer.

Where are we in our prayer lives?

If we are honest most of us are probably lukewarm.

We pray when we have to. We pray on a Sunday and perhaps catch a few moments during the week.

But prayer, real prayer is not simply read from liturgical prayer books as a ritual; real prayer comes from the heart. Paul said it is this spirit within us groaning. That's what this woman was doing, her spirit within her was groaning to God.

Fourthly, there is another great quality that this incredible lady shows, and that is her ability to keep positive throughout her engagement with Christ.

She was in the midst of trouble, she was passionately groaning out for help, and yet she could smile. She could lift her head and enjoy almost banter with Jesus.

When Jesus spoke of taking the children's bread and throwing it to the dogs – a statement that had in mind, Israel's ancient relationship with Phoenicia. To the Jews, they were considered to be like dogs. However, the Greek word that Jesus uses – is not 'dogs that roam the street' but it is the word for the household pet of a 'puppy'.

So, when we read this, it might come over from Jesus as cold and harsh, but I'm sure as our Lord said those words, he was not being cruel to the woman, but he said then in a loving, a gracious, way that would invoke her to respond and respond she does. In her immortal words, *“But even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table.”*

Inspired words that showed she was a woman of positivity – a woman of faith, who was not going to lie down to the situation – a woman of great spirit and cheerfulness.

She was able to turn Christ's words into a light hearted moment of banter and say that, Yes, they may be dogs or puppies, but even they can receive the crumbs of blessing that fall from their master's table.

Yet another moment of humiliation for the woman, as she implies that Israel is their Master, but I think in these words she implies that Christ has the power to give and to heal, and she was willing to take whatever crumbs of blessing and support Jesus could give her.

So, I hope this gospel story is of help to you this morning. If you feel far from God, if you feel that you have no right to enter his presence, if dutiful disciples have prevented you from coming to Christ, then learn from this woman and don't give up, and receive from God any crumbs of blessing that fall from his table.

This woman had an audacious love; a worshipping faith; a persistent spirit; an unconquerable hope; a cheerful nature. These are the qualities that bring us close to God and make us want to fall at his feet and say, “*Lord have mercy on me.*”

Maybe this morning, we have a burden on our shoulders, that only God can help us with. Maybe we have been carrying it for some time now.

What is our response?

Well, Jesus said come to me, all who carry a heavy burden, and I will give you rest. Make time today, to be alone with God and to fall on your knees and let the groaning spirit within you connect with Him.

Remember that He is already on your side, as Jesus travelled to Phoenicia, He is traveling to you today. He wants to bring healing and comfort to your soul, but he needs you to reach out and receive Him.

Amen

She was a woman of faith.

She was a woman of persistence.

She was a woman of cheerfulness.