

Since the advent of radio and television, catch phrases sometimes uttered quite innocently can be known throughout the world in a very short time. Their words become immortalised in the hearts of millions. They roll off the tongue and conjure up thoughts much deeper than their original meaning. Many biblical phrases are like this and some have been turned into prayers; words from Jesus, St Paul, and other prophets or saints. But today we heard the story of one unknown woman who has inspired a prayer that is said by millions every week, yet many do not think of her when they say it. Little could she realise the impact she would make on the world when she spoke to Jesus about crumbs or scraps from a table.

This Canaanite woman (Matthew 15.22), or Syrophenician woman as St Mark calls her, was a non-Jew living in the country we know as Lebanon. Jesus was making one of his rare trips away from his home country to Tyre and Sidon. When this Gentile woman asks Jesus to heal her daughter, he tells her that his first duty is to his own people, the Jews. But moved by her faith, he answers her prayer, her cry for help, and heals her daughter. Perhaps he was influenced by the fact that her prayer was not for herself; it was her daughter's needs she presented to him. It was an example of faith in the healing prayer for others. The sincerity of her last humble prayer, "Lord, help me", moves Jesus to step outside the limits he had set himself. He had intended to limit his actions to the people of Israel so as to ensure that his message about God was established on a firm foundation amongst those who had been steeped in the prophecies of the ancient scriptures, before being shared with the rest of the world. But he made an exception. Faith can sometimes move mountains; faith can sometimes make things happen ahead of planned time. Some things are slow to take effect; others happen overnight; and the healing miracles of Jesus need no long period of convalescence.

But there is no guarantee that any prayer will be answered in the way we ask. For it might or might not be for the ultimate good of ourselves or of others to be answered in the way we think it should. Yet we can always ask in faith and leave the response to God, as did the lady of Canaan. She asked in faith and in deep humility asked for just the crumbs that fall from the master's table. This remark inspired the prayer that has been used for over 400 years in England and many places throughout the world.

The Prayer of Humble Access in our Holy Communion service reminds us, although perhaps not consciously, of this humility: "We do not presume to come to this your table ...". It is a prayer which holds deep symbolical meaning for many; yet a meaning which they find hard to put into words. When the Series II service was first introduced, this prayer was made optional and many clergy omitted it, feeling that the phraseology was no longer appropriate, as is apparently the case here, but popular demand led to its retention by many churches in later revisions of the service.

Admittedly few today would normally say in a literal sense that they "are not worthy so much as to gather up the crumbs under the table", but we use such words to remind ourselves that we do not

earn God's favour. Our worthiness is no yardstick of our relationship with him; we come to him by his grace alone. For me, the importance of this prayer is highlighted by our common action. For this is the one occasion when the priest kneels or bows together with the congregation whilst saying a prayer, as distinct from saying a confession.

By using this language of imagery, referring to the crumbs, in effect we convey far more meaning than the literal words could ever convey; acknowledging our complete trust in God's grace in the certain hope and assurance that he will not refuse us. In the same way, few today would consciously use the words to 'eat and drink his body' in a literal sense. Indeed, the Church of England has always insisted that the bread and wine in the Holy Communion service remain just bread and wine after consecration. We reject the Roman doctrine of transubstantiation, which says that only the appearance of the bread and wine remains. Yes, we believe very much in the 'real presence' of Christ in the Eucharist, but in the sense that the elements are the means by which he enters into our hearts and strengthens us. We use them in anticipation of the meaning conveyed by the later invitation, when the priest invites us to "Draw near and receive the body of our Lord Jesus ... Take this in remembrance ... and feed on him *in your hearts, by faith, with thanksgiving*".

Like the other woman who touched the hem of Jesus' robe in the complete faith that his presence would heal her of the haemorrhage, we receive the sacramental bread and wine in the certain assurance that, if taken in faith, God will use this means to come into our hearts. As our Catechism teaches us, a sacrament is "an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace"; that is, something we can touch to represent something we cannot touch. A £10 note is a secular example. It is just a piece of paper and in itself is worth no more than any other piece of paper with pretty pictures printed on it. It is only the words of the Bank of England that makes it worth £10, if they honour their promise to redeem it for that sum. If the Bank goes out of existence the paper is worthless.

The Canaanite woman shows us a classic example of faith, perseverance, love, and humility. If we too come to Communion with God in a similar attitude of mind and offer our prayer to him as we receive the sacramental elements, perhaps we too will hear from him those wonderful and inspiring words which she heard as St Matthew says: "great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish". Then you will go home content.