
Bread for the Dogs

Sermon • Rev'd John Shoaf • 8 September 2024

Isaiah 35:1-7a • James 2:1-9 • Mark 7:24-30



May the words of my mouth and the thoughts of our hearts give glory to you, O Lord. Amen.

My father has always had a big influence on my life. Even now, when he's been gone for 27 years. Jug — that's what we and everyone called him, Jug, although his given name was George — had a big effect on all parts of my life. You know the acronym WWJD: What Would Jesus Do? In my childhood and youth, for me, it would have been What Would Jug Do? In those years, I didn't know Jesus, but I knew Jug. Jug was very independent. Jug stood on his own two feet. He was a very practical man, he had a great store of common sense, and he was accomplished in many ways.

Oops! This is beginning to sound like the Father's Day sermon I should have written last week. Forgive me for being a week late.

This relationship with my father was a very good one, because I respected him. And as I grew old enough to be able to converse intelligently, he respected me, too. I knew, and shared, a lot of his opinions on politics, his view of the world, his appetite for trying new things of all kinds, his emphasis on politeness and the right way of doing things. He felt that he did not need to bow to anyone — that he was as good a man as any other man.

This independence and sense of self-worth, you may say, is very American, ever since the early pioneer days. It's also very Kiwi, in my view; the number 8 wire mentality. You can make anything work through your own ingenuity, and you can proudly stand on your own merits, making for yourself the life you choose. You don't need anyone.

This feeling on my father's part came to the fore when we discussed religion. My father was not a Christian for several reasons: he thought faith and the Bible were unscientific. He couldn't believe in anything that couldn't be proved through the scientific method in the physical world. He thought that Christianity was a crutch for weak people. And he could not acknowledge that there was a Lord over him, to whom he owed obedience.

This last is I think a sticking-point for many people. It didn't used to be, hundreds of years ago; the common man or woman was used to the idea that another being was their master. Most societies were hierarchical, with kings and queens or other potentates. One owed allegiance and sometimes one's life to the ruler. But in today's world, in the West anyway, societies are generally more or less democratic, and all people are declared to be equal. Most Western societies have thrown off their kings and queens, or rendered them relatively impotent. The real power is in the legislatures, elected bodies made up of people just like us, with no hereditary distinction.

In such societies, it is easy to come to believe that we owe allegiance to no one at all — not even to a god.

I hasten to say that self-reliance is not, in most cases, a fault, except when it gets in the way of perceiving one's true place in the world, as a human being, created by God. Jesus says we must not put anyone else ahead of God in our love — that we are to love God with all our heart and soul and mind and strength, then after that, we love other people. Lastly come ourselves. In our modern societies, though, we are constantly receiving messages from advertising, from the internet, from self-help gurus — from many sources — that we are to love ourselves. We are to build up our children's self-esteem. We are all to reassure each other that we are what matters, and self-regard makes us strong.

But it doesn't make us strong. It makes us weak, because it denies the source of all strength: Almighty God. I use the old adjective, "Almighty", advisedly, for God is all-mighty, and we are not. We must humble ourselves before God.

If our God were the cruel god which some make him out to be, the god of thunder and punishment, we'd be in real trouble. But God is the God of love. Humbling ourselves before him should be our natural wish, as we live in the warmth of his love.

In today's Gospel, we meet a woman who understands all this. The woman is a Gentile and a Syrian, and this is a story told to Jews, who would understand immediately that she was beneath them, racially and socially. She approaches Jesus — how dare she! — and asks him to cure her daughter, who is ill. Jesus, who knows he was sent by his Father to the lost sheep of Israel, initially refuses, for "It isn't right to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs" (Mark 7:27). But this does not discourage her. Jesus has actually insulted her, calling her a dog, a cur, the lowest of the low. (Again, the Jews he was speaking to would understand and agree.)

But you see, this woman knows who Jesus is. And she accepts the role he assigns her. He is the Lord, who can heal if he wishes. And before him, she is as the dogs who lie under the master's table, gobbling up the crumbs which the master's children let fall. "Even the dogs under the table," she says to him, "eat the children's leftovers!" And for that answer, he grants her request.

So what has the woman done? She has humbled herself, showing in one brief speech that she recognises Jesus' status as the Lord, and her own humble status before him. She is also asking for his help not for herself, but for someone else — her sick daughter. And above all, she had great faith in Jesus, that he could and would cure her daughter. I think Jesus was amazed, just as he was when he encountered the centurion whose slave was ill (Luke 7:1-10). Such faith he did not often encounter.

Jesus' answer to the woman may sound harsh and insulting, but it teaches those around him a lesson. It teaches them that Jesus is the Lord, and that the plans of God are all-important. Jesus was sent to Israel first, but ultimately his mission is to all people, for God created all of us for his love. The Jews around him may have been surprised that he helped a Syrian woman, but it didn't matter where she came from. What mattered was her faith in Jesus and her humility in asking for his help.

This woman is an example for us all. In our own times of distress, we know that we may approach our God in faith and humility, and we will be heard and comforted. Thanks be to God. Amen.