Prayer: Lord Jesus, Son of David and Messiah – give us crumbs to eat today from your table – Amen.

Our gospel reading this morning concerns a woman in very difficult circumstances.

She was a Gentile – born on the wrong side of the tracks – one of whom the Jews described as “dogs”. She was struggling with powerful forces of evil.

She had no control over her daughter who was demon possessed.

She was desperate and so she came to plead with Jesus.

Jesus seems to put her off – stressing his own priorities but she will not be deflected.

She prays on even when she seems to get no answer and is ignored

She perseveres and eventually Jesus grants her request.

I guess many would identify with her today.

People also born in difficult circumstances, people also looked down on by many in society, people struggling with their children and with forces of evil,

People who can’t believe what they have seen on their TV sets, people who have cried out to God but feel their prayers have not been heard let alone answered.

Well, in this short story, we learn the value of three things:-

1. **Focus.**

This is the only occasion when Jesus actually left Jewish territory.

It was a time of deliberate withdrawal.

The end was coming near.

He was preparing to face the Cross.

He needed peace and quiet.

It is not that Jesus is deliberately hurtful or rude. It is that he knows his calling – and that is the mission to Israel and to die in Jerusalem on a cross for the sins of the world.

The gospel writer tells us that he set his face as a flint towards Jerusalem.

All around, followers were urging him to delay or go elsewhere.

They knew what lay ahead in the capital and wanted to avoid it.
Jesus also knew what lay ahead but knew he shouldn't avoid it.

He was focused on his mission and so when a gentile woman approaches him, he wonders whether this is a distraction and so seems to rebuff her – stressing the nature of his focus to the house of Israel.

Focus is important. As Christians, focus remains vital today too. We must not be tossed about by winds of fashion or moulded by the world's agenda.

Do you know what your focus is at the moment? Is it caring for a relative or leading a home group or serving the poor? I can't tell you as individuals what your focus should be - but as a community perhaps we need to work together in a new way to call society back to a sense of right and wrong.

The causes of the horrifying behaviour in our cities last week are complex but part of it must stem from the moral vacuum left by a post Christian society.

We have abandoned the 10 commandments and now seem to focus only on ourselves - what Ed Milliband has called a “Me first” culture - Me and my needs and my rights.

For some time now the message published abroad is that morality is passé, conscience is for wimps and the great commandment is “Thou shalt not be found out”.

If that is your focus then the opportunity to loot makes sense.

But it’s no good just pointing the finger at the obvious law breakers.

We all share the responsibility.

Bankers and politicians have already modelled looting and benefited from greed and opportunity. Can we blame others for following their example?

We have abandoned virtue and adopted the ethics of indifference, dressed as liberalism. We have substituted welfare payments for relationships, rights for love, and the sterile processes of the public sector for the warm morality of living communities.

Now the police have put down the riots, the rest of us have more to do than clean up the broken glass.

Let’s pray along with the Archbishop of Canterbury when he says that this is an opportunity to refocus on what is really important, on what really counts.

Character and virtue though do not grow on trees. They must be rooted in something people see as objective – not dependant on feelings or the power of a dominant group. Right and wrong must be embedded in a moral order.

As a community, we need to focus on these things and work and pray for them.
Jesus had focus but so did the woman. She was focused on the needs of her daughter and she was not to be deterred -

2. So secondly we see Flexibility:

Jesus holds to his focus and seems to rebuff the Gentile woman.

His disciples certainly urge him to send her away. Jesus says – v26

“It is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs”

It sounds harsh but of course tone is all important.

A hard thing can be said with a disarming smile.

We can call an old friend a “young rascal” or an “old villain” with deep affection.

The word Jesus uses for dogs is kunaria which are not the street dogs, the scavengers – but the household pets.

Surely Jesus said what he did with compassion in his eyes and the woman saw it and so she presses him – v27 – “Yes but even the pet dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table.” She recognizes his need to focus but asks for a bit of flexibility.

Jesus eyes light up at such a response and so he grants her request.

He may have been focused but he was flexible.

Jesus had proved that again and again in his ministry.

Back in chapter 14, when he heard of John the Baptist’s execution, Jesus had wanted to get away to pray but a large crowd followed him.

What did he do? He was flexible and taught them all day and then provided food for them.

After that, he had tried again to be alone but a storm had built up and his disciples were afraid in their boat – so he was flexible – and came to them walking across the water.

We too must retain a capacity for flexibility whilst keeping our focus – a willingness to meet a particular need despite our prior plans, a readiness to change course because of an unexpected opportunity.

What should our response be to the events of last week – maybe some flexibility in our previously settled plans - a renewed concern for our local community, maybe a fresh involvement in local politics, maybe a new commitment to prayer in some way – it may not fit with our primary focus but let’s be willing to respond to particular circumstances.

Focus, Flexibility and 3. Faith

The key ingredient that changed Jesus heart was the woman’s persevering faith – v28
Jesus said to her “Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish” And her daughter was healed instantly.”

The woman’s faith grew as she was in contact with Jesus.

She begins by calling him “Son of David”. She ended by calling him “Lord”

She realizes that he is more than human – that he is divine.

That is what Jesus wanted to awaken in her. He wanted her to see that a request to a great man was not enough. It must be turned into a prayer to the living God.

Likewise with us. As we have contact with Christ – so our faith will grow. Faith can’t blossom in a vacuum. We must carve out time with God – reading his word, listening to the voice of Jesus, praying to him.

It was faith that led to worship.

She began by following and shouting – v22

She ends up on her knees – v25

Likewise with us, we should come to Jesus in adoration and only then express our needs and hopes.

Most importantly it was faith that persevered. She wasn’t going to be put off.

Affliction sometimes proves a blessing. This mother had seen her child tormented with a demon and was helpless. But that very affliction brought her to Jesus and taught her to pray.

Are you facing some affliction this morning?
I don’t want to minimize it but it can be used for good.

Trials can make us think and drive us to our knees.

For all of us, the shock of last week’s behaviour can be used for good – to drive us to our knees. I do hope that more of us will take advantage of the many opportunities we have at the Cathedral to come together to pray.

It’s easy to be downcast by the events of last week – to be depressed by humanity’s capacity for cruelty and bad behaviour like robbing wounded people of their wallet whilst pretending to offer help.

Jonathan Sacks the chief Rabbi asks in the times on Friday –and I quote “Can a society be re-moralised?”

Well – there is an historic precedent. In the 1820s rates of crime were high. It was unsafe to walk the streets of London in the day because of pickpockets and at night because of unruly ruffians. And yet dating from that time there was a great shift in public opinion that gave rise to a whole series of movements for social reform, among them – the abolition of slavery, temperance movements, the creation of urban police forces, the drive to eliminate corporal and capital punishment and the creation of Sunday schools.”

A key factor in all of that of course was the gospel of Jesus Christ – a rediscovery of the power of the Holy Spirit to change lives. It can happen again.

Last week, society here looked into its own soul – and it was not a pretty sight but as our epistle reading put it – Romans 11v32 – “God has imprisoned all in disobedience so that he may be merciful to all”
Today then is a day of opportunity. Our God is merciful. We need to work towards reestablishing a proper respect for Him, a true understanding of right and wrong, a fresh obedience to his commandments. It’s happened before. It can happen again.

Let’s keep focused on God’s agenda for us but stay willing to adjust to the needs that present themselves and let’s have faith to dare to believe that God might move again amongst us for the reformation of society and the rekindling of true religion and virtue.

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