

Just desserts?

Genesis 45:1-15; Psalm 133; Romans 11:1-2a and 29-32; Matthew 15:21-28

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Matthew 15:21-28

Leaving the region of Gennesaret, Jesus withdrew to the regions of Tyre and Sidon. There a Canaanite woman, who was from those territories, came out and started crying out: "Master, Son of David, have mercy on me. My daughter is sorely plagued by demons." But Jesus did not say a thing to her. Then his disciples came and began to ask him: "Send her away for she keeps crying out after us." Jesus answered them: "I was only sent for the lost sheep of the house of Israel."

But the woman who had come out knelt before Jesus and said: "Master, help me." He answered: "It is not right to take the children's bread and throw it away to the dogs." She answered: "Yes, Master, but even the dogs eat up the crumbs that fall from the tables of their masters." Jesus then answered: "Oh woman, your faith is great. Let what you want be done for you." Her daughter was healed at that very hour.

There are many people who think that God is not interested in our daily, physical needs. The Gospel readings of these last weeks and today should dispel any questions as to whether God cares for our needs.

Two weeks ago, in the reading from Matthew 14, you heard how Jesus, even after he had withdrawn from public view after the news of the execution of his cousin John the Baptist, still attended to the crowds who followed him to a deserted place. **Matthew 14:14**: "As he went ashore he saw a great throng; and he had compassion on them, and healed their sick.

And then, when it grew late, he met their physical needs by giving them food. Out of a few loaves and fishes, he created enough food to feed about 10,000 people (5,000 men, plus women and children).

It wasn't Jesus, but his disciples who were the ones who seemed overwhelmed by how to meet the needs of their fellow Jews and so fell back on having them fend for themselves in their need. **Matthew 14:15**: "When it was evening, the disciples came to him and said, "This is a lonely place, and the day is now over; **send the crowds away** to go into the villages and buy food for themselves."" These disciples are men who not only do not yet believe in what their Lord can do to meet the physical needs of the multitudes but also they don't appear to be willing or able to do anything themselves to meet the needs of the people.

Nevertheless, God is gracious and patient. And so it was that last week you heard in Matthew's Gospel of how Jesus, again having withdrawn to be on his own in prayer, but seeing the physical need into which these same doubting disciples had fallen as they struggled against the waves and wind on the Sea of Galilee, came to them and calmed the waves. (Of course, he did so after showing one of his disciples, Peter, a Greek word that means "rock", and one of the disciples for whom this church is named, that

without God they wouldn't make it but with God anything is possible. Why God can even make a rock walk on water!)

And then today, yet a third time, we read again that Jesus had withdrawn, this time to the regions of Tyre and Sidon in present day southern Lebanon, beyond the historic borders of ancient Israel. Of course, human need exists there, too. And so, there again he meets someone who is in need: a persistent woman who will not stop hounding him and his disciples because her daughter is plagued by at least one demon and perhaps more. And again, Jesus meets the need as the girl is healed.

So, no, God -- as we know God through the incarnation of His Son Jesus -- is very concerned about the physical needs of people.

But, this was not new to the people of God. Even before the incarnation, God's people knew that God provided for human needs. For example, Israel knew that God cares for the orphan and the widow, for the poor and the dispossessed. **Deuteronomy 15:4** But there will be no poor among you (for the LORD will bless you in the land which the LORD your God gives you for an inheritance to possess). And there are dozens of specific examples of how God provided for the physical needs of his people by giving them water, food, shelter, and on and on.

But does everyone deserve God's provision?

The people of Israel took the examples of God's provision for them and began to think that God was ONLY willing to provide for the physical needs of His people, but not for non-Jews. In fact, they thought that God was interested only in Israel, while consigning the rest of the world to destruction.

Why? Because Israel deserved to have God treat them well. Israel, not the Gentiles, worshipped the true God and served him. The Gentiles, in contrast, ignored God and worshipped other gods, while living lives that were immoral to a shocking degree.

So where Israel deserved to have God care for them as His special people, all the Gentiles deserved was destruction for their worship of idols and practice of immorality. As the apostle Paul, a Jewish rabbi himself, wrote in **Romans 1:18**: "For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and wickedness of men who by their wickedness suppress the truth."

But, Paul the Christian also raised a problem, namely, that in fact the Jews themselves were really no better off than the Gentiles: **Romans 2:17, 21-24**: "But if you call yourself a Jew and rely upon the law and boast of your relation to God... you then who teach others, will you not teach yourself? While you preach against stealing, do you steal? You who say that one must not commit adultery, do you commit adultery? You who abhor idols, do you rob temples? You who boast in the law, do you dishonor God by breaking the law? For, as it is written, "The name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you.""

In fact, Israel was supposed to have been God's vehicle of salvation to all of the earth. Israel was supposed to have proclaimed to all the nations who God was and they were to show the nations how to live as obedient children of God. But Israel had failed to do so. Instead, Israel decided to do what the people of God have subsequently also been guilty of doing: they decided to keep the message of salvation to itself and just enjoy the benefits of God among themselves, consigning all the others "out there", people in fact like you and me, to God's wrath.

This is why the Jewish disciples of Jesus are so anxious yet again to turn away this Canaanite woman. "Send her away."

Some even think that Jesus himself turns her away. But, what Jesus says to his disciples when he tells them "I was only sent to the lost sheep of the house of Israel" is simply that Jesus will fulfill what God's plan has been throughout the centuries: salvation begins with Israel and then extends to the Gentiles, even if now it is clear that neither the Gentiles NOR Israel deserve this salvation. This is why he had told his disciples in chapter 10 when he sent them out on mission: "Go nowhere among the Gentiles, and enter no town of the Samaritans, but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel". He will do so even though He knows that in spite of all of the opportunities to see God at work in Jesus, Israel will not heed him and will in fact turn against him and crucify him. Israel will not heed God's call, even through God's own son.

And so, this story comes as a glimmer of what is to come in God's history of salvation, as this pagan Canaanite woman, in contrast to the Pharisees who know their Bibles backwards and forwards, is willing to heed Jesus, even if it means accepting the tough language: Israel first, then the Gentiles. She is like that Roman centurion whose slave Jesus also heals in chapter 8, and who knows that he is unworthy to have Jesus come into his house -- so, just speak the word, Lord, and my servant will be healed. Jesus had said to him: I haven't seen faith like this in Israel... meaning, "where I expect to find it".

Like the Centurion in that earlier story, the woman here too says to Jesus: 'Lord, I'm not asking for your full and undivided attention. You can continue to devote your attention to Israel. All I'm asking for is the crumbs that fall from the table.'

To which Jesus responds: 'OK, you can have that for now. Let what you want for your daughter be done.'

It's not much, is it? And it certainly doesn't come with a great pronouncement by Jesus: I heal her in the name of the God of Israel.

But it's a start. And it's only a start, because while that's the end of the Gospel reading, that's not the end of the story, is it?

True, it's yet another example of how God is interested in the physical and this-worldly needs of people, all people.

And, yes, it's a further indication that faith can be found outside of Israel, which is where Jesus should find faith but doesn't.

But this story doesn't end here.

Because there's a part of this story that we need to know but don't know: what did this woman do with what happened to her daughter?

Did the woman go home, find her daughter healed, and in her joy forget all about HOW she was healed? Maybe like so many people she got caught up in the girl's rescue that she forgot to ask the name of the man who rescued her.

Or she might have said that finally all the collected prayers and magic potions and medical remedies that she had tried over the months, now capped by Jesus' special powers, had actually done something. You don't think that she asked anyone else to help her daughter? If your child was in serious need, you'd do everything you could to save her, including going to the hospital. In the end, was it the doctor, or your prayers, or something else that healed her?

Or, maybe she was so taken with this man who had ventured into her strange land that she started to ask questions about him, maybe find out his name, who this God was that he served, what else he had done. Maybe she even became a follower of Jesus?

We just don't know.

But, that matters. Because while God is interested in the physical, this-worldly needs of people, that's not all He's interested in, and that certainly isn't the reason why the Son of God took flesh.

The Son of God did not take flesh in order simply to heal all the ills of this world -- including the ills of a Canaanite woman he just happened to meet because he just happened to cross over into the territory of Tyre and Sidon. The Son of God took flesh to become the one, perfect sacrifice that would cover and take away the sin of the world, and save us from death by leading us into eternal life. This is the ultimate provision of God. It does not un-do the importance of meeting our physical needs in this world but it far transcends them by meeting all of them in the next. And this is what God the Son came to do. The first is simply a picture of what the last will be like.

And the point of this story is that that salvation is available to the whole world, not just to Israel. Because the point of the Gospel is to show that God is gracious and merciful in spite of the fact that no one deserves it, whether it be this woman, whom the Jewish rabbis considered unclean from her birth for all of her life, or a Roman legionnaire, or the most law-abiding Jewish Pharisee. Whether it be the British looters or the good people of this church... all are undeserving and therefore God can have mercy on all and no one can say: I deserved it.

All of us, not just this woman, but Israel, and the church, even you and me, do not deserve to gather up the crumbs under the table of the Lord. We deserve neither the good things of this life nor the good things of the life to come.

But, God in His grace and mercy has opened the floodgates that all may come in and all may eat, both of the good things of the here-and-now and of the heavenly banquet that is yet to come. Both Israel, who failed Him miserably, and the hated Gentiles, who had never known Him. Can you grasp this, people? Oh the depths of the grace of God.

My hope is that at the heavenly banquet to which God calls us, undeserving as we are, we shall meet that Canaanite woman and her daughter.

I don't know if we will.

But I can tell you that you will be there at that banquet if you recognize the source of all that you have is God, and if you recognize God through his Son is the source of the life to come that He promises you, and if, in your hearts, you know that you have deserved none of this and that it all comes about by His gracious mercy alone, then I can tell you: you'll be there.

On the last day, when He comes to judge the living and the dead, we will be judged not by anything we have done to deserve God's favour because there is nothing that we could do, but whether we have been thankful for what He, who first loved us, has always done for us.

So, when you come to the altar today, unworthy even to gather up the crumbs under his table, "feed on Him in your hearts by faith with thanksgiving" for his blood was shed for thee, so "be thankful".