



A sermon for the Cathedral Eucharist at Wells Cathedral, preached on Sunday 16 August by the Reverend Canon Tim Stevens, Canon Precentor.

The Eleventh Sunday after Trinity

Readings: Genesis 45: 1-15; Matthew 15: 10-28

There was once a young man who was keen to learn about success. He sought out a wise man, and he asked: “What is the secret to success?”

The wise man told the young man to meet him early the next morning at the bank of the river.

They met, and the wise man insisted that they walk into the river. When they were chest deep in water, the wise man took the young man, and held him under the water.

The young man struggled, he tried to get free, but the wise man’s grip was too strong, and kept him there until he started to turn blue.

Eventually, he released his grip, and the young man’s head came out of the water, he gasped, and took a much-needed breath of air. The wise man then asked him: “What did you want most when your head was in the water?” The answer came: “Air”.

The wise man replied: “That is the secret to success – when you want it as badly as you wanted air while you were underwater, then you will get it.” There is no other secret.

Now, before I am reported to the Safeguarding team, I’m not suggesting that we will all succeed if we hold each other’s heads underwater, but what this story demonstrates is depth of desire.

When we want something, what do we do about it?

I am sure that in all our lives, there will have been times when we have wanted something – and when we're told how to go about achieving it, we've decided that it is just too much like hard work, and not bothered. And I'm just as sure that for all of us, there have been times when we are utterly determined to get the thing we want and have done extraordinary things to be successful – perhaps things that we would never have imagined ourselves doing, but in order to succeed, we have pushed ourselves beyond limits that we knew we had.

So, perhaps success is about the strength of desire. The young man in the water knew that without air, not only was he not going to succeed, but indeed he was not going to live.

In that moment, he wanted air more than he could probably describe. It would have been his only thought, his sole desire, his one purpose in life – simply to get air.

What he didn't know was that he would get the air he needed. The wise man was teaching him the answer to his question, not trying to kill him. The wise man would let go and let him up in time. The wise man would change his life, but cared enough not to end it, and the thing that the young man desired more than anything else would come to him.

The same can be seen in our Gospel reading this morning. The Canaanite woman came to seek Jesus' help. What did she want more than anything? What was the greatest desire in her life at that moment?

Her daughter was tormented by a demon, and she wanted to see her healed. She wanted to see her daughter healed, and she had faith that Jesus could heal her. She had faith in Jesus, and so she came to see him. She came to see him... a bit like the young man coming to the wise man. And in the same way, the response is somewhat surprising, even shocking.

Is this the Jesus we know? Is this the Jesus we put our faith in?

First, Jesus doesn't answer the woman. Perhaps she could understand this. There's a large crowd, a lot of noise. Perhaps she hadn't shouted loudly enough. Perhaps he hadn't heard her. She just has to try harder.

But then, the disciples urge Jesus to send the woman away. She has such a desire for Jesus' help, but Jesus and his disciples are busy, she is a nuisance, send her away, and they can get on with what they're there for.

We don't know whether the woman heard this, but we know that she did hear when Jesus addressed her directly. Two of the most shocking things that Jesus says in the entire Gospel follow. First, I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. Jews. Those who have gone astray from their faith, I'm there for them. But a Canaanite woman, a Gentile, she is not why I'm here, what I'm here for.

This doesn't ring true with much of Jesus' teaching, and yet he speaks these words.

And then, it gets worse, when he says directly to the woman – it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs. You are not a child of God, you are not a descendant of Abraham, you are not a Jew. You, you are a Gentile, which is no better than a dog, and you are not deserving of the food that is for the children of God.

What is going on in Jesus' mind? The loving, caring, saviour, Messiah, who has come to be a light to lighten the Gentiles, in the words of Simeon, as well as the Glory of Israel.

But the Canaanite woman answers this question for us. She responds to Jesus' apparent dismissal. She tells him that even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from the table. Even a crumb, even the smallest bit of his love, is all she needs, and she knows that this will be enough, and her daughter will be healed.

We could argue that this is the moment when the division between Jew and Gentile dissolves completely. As St Paul will later say, there is no longer Jew or Greek, for we are all one in Jesus Christ. The Canaanite woman may never be able to claim that she is a Jew, but she can claim that she is a child of God – her faith is in him, his love is for her, and she has proved that, just as the young man wanted air with a fervency that took over his every thought, she wanted Jesus with every breath in her body.

And as we heard, Jesus heard her. Jesus knew that she was genuine. He recognised that she did not just want healing for her daughter, but that she had faith that was so deep, so fervent, so true, that nothing was going to stand in between her and Jesus.

In this moment, Jesus demonstrates that God's love, that God's grace, is there for all. His disciples have not yet understood this – they wanted to send the woman away. But this one woman, came to Jesus understanding, knowing, sure, that he loved her, and that if she accepted him, believed in him, longed for him

with a fervent longing which was beyond all other, then he would answer her plea, her prayer.

As we continue through this year of prayer, as we continue to consider what it is to be a community of faith, as we continue to grow together, this is what we need to hear. Is our faith, is our desire for God, so fervent, so real, so genuine, and so deep, that we will not be swayed, put off, upset, or turned away, but keep our eyes on him in all we do?

Are our eyes fixed on God, so that even when it feels that prayer is not answered, or not answered as we thought it should be, we recognise God's love and grace, and trust in his healing, resolving, loving power?

Is God first in our lives? Are we ready to know that without him, we are no better than the young boy without air?

What can we learn from the Canaanite woman, just as the disciples did? The dog, the Gentile, taught the Jews so much in that moment.

What are we ready to teach the world, when we do it with Jesus at our side, and in utter fervent desire for him?

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