**Most of the Lectionary texts for this Sunday reflect on God’s mercy and how that mercy encourages reconciliation amongst human beings. When human beings are part of God’s recipe for success, the final product is usually, sadly, a hard-won victory but thankfully God finds ways of overcoming our occasionally ‘childish’ rather than the preferable ‘childlike’ behaviour!**

**The huge umbrella of God’s mercy is illustrated by the story of Jesus and the Canaanite woman in Matthew 15. The woman’s faith and persistence, in a situation where she might easily have been intimidated, in a way, actually ministers to Jesus. As she becomes a means of God’s grace to *Jesus*, Jesus extends God’s mercy to *her*. But this lovely story of how Jesus engages with the Canaanite woman, her ministry to him and his ministry to her, needs to be treated with great care.**

**Some interpreters of this story have been scared away by Jesus’ use of a seemingly rather harsh metaphor for the woman as a ‘non-Jew’ but it’s a part of the story that we can’t just ignore or dismiss.**

**We have to confront the term ‘dogs’ honestly and what it might imply about the relation of Jesus to the woman and vice versa.**

**The terminology is really about the fact that this is a story being told from a Jewish point of view. As Christian readers of the story and therefore ‘non-Jews’, we have to take a ‘leap’ of imagination to really appreciate its original impact.**

**The woman, we know, is a Canaanite but she acknowledges Jesus’ Jewish status by calling him “Son of David”. Jesus doesn’t answer her but when the disciples, annoyed by her persistence, want him to send her away, he says to them: “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel”.**

**The Jewish religious authorities repeatedly come in for some quite scathing criticism and the writer of Matthew’s text wants to make it absolutely clear that God has NOT abandoned the Jews. God is still faithful to the covenant and Jesus ministry is *initially* to the Jews. Only AFTER crucifixion and resurrection is the ‘door’ thrown wide open to the non-Jewish world (28:16-20). Before then, only here and there in the story: The Magi (2:1-12), The Centurion (8:5-13) and then the Canaanite Woman, do we get glimpses of God’s intention to be all-inclusive.**

**So Jesus’ apparent reluctance in responding to the pleas of the woman is just showing that, at that particular time, *the Jews* were the current priority. This is what brings us to the heart of the story. The Canaanite woman pretty much ‘wrenches’ from Jesus the blessing that she, as a non-Jewish mother, needs.**

**First, she is persistent. She refuses to be deterred either by Jesus’ reluctance or by the disciples’ irritation. She perseveres in her conviction that Jesus can do for her what she desperately needs and Jesus finally says: *“Woman great is your faith!”***

**In this determined and single-minded pursuit of Jesus, she presents a stark contrast to the Scribes and Pharisees, with all of their legal entanglements earlier in this chapter (15:1-9) and the disciples with their lack of understanding shown in the eleven verses that precede our text.**

**But this woman isn’t just persistent – she is also free from any pretension.**

**Though she comes and kneels before him, Jesus, whose focus is on the primary mission to Israel, makes a harsh response to her. The use of the term ‘dogs’ even though it could be metaphorically translated as ‘puppies’, is hardly a term of endearment! It was regularly used to refer to Gentiles and so the woman would have every right to be offended by it. But her response doesn’t have any hint of recrimination. She just says: “Yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master’s table”. Basically, she is willing to accept the title, provided that the outcome is that she will get what she wants from the table. She is actually accepting her secondary status as an outsider and a Gentile but still takes the risk of pleading for help.**

**The woman with her persistence and lack of pretension, in a way performs a ministry for Jesus. She turns into a sort of ‘spokesperson’ to bring about the release of divine grace to effect a healing. She is staking her claim on the mercy and generosity of God. Other people minister to Jesus by providing food or housing but she does it by facilitating his movement across ethnic boundaries – and this anticipates God’s mission to the wider world beyond the Jews. But Jesus also ministers to the Canaanite woman. Her demon-possessed child is healed. The Son of David gives wholeness to a Gentile daughter.**

**As in the case of the Centurion’s son in chapter 8 of Matthew’s Gospel, there’s no physical contact or dramatic action. The spoken word is enough to cure and so the miracle of faith is confirmed by a miracle of healing.**

**In verses 10 to 20 that precede our text, it is possible to see the huge contrast between the failure to understand that is shown by the crowds, the disciples and Peter – and the profound understanding of the Canaanite woman.**

**As an outsider, she understand something profound that the Jews don’t seem able to do – that the Good News also belongs to the people whom they would regard as the ‘outsiders’.**

**The reconciliation between human beings, to which I referred at the beginning, has as an essential component, a willingness and an ability to see beyond a person’s background, colour, culture and any other variations from the things that are within our own ‘frame of reference’. The unattractive human trait of arrogance, which emerges when one person sees someone else’s difference as something which is defective or substandard, is something which we can overcome if our faith in God is true and strong and obedient in nature.**

**Amen.**