

**‘The Faith of a Canaanite Woman - Support Sunday’ a sermon preached by Stephen Dewdney at the morning service at Knox Church Dunedin on Sunday 20 August 2017**

The tide is turning, opposition to Jesus is increasing. John the Baptist has been beheaded. Jesus has been directly challenging the Jewish religious leaders. And soon Jesus will give the first prediction of his death, a prediction that will all too soon come true. And in the middle of this growing rejection from the Jewish leaders, a Gentile woman who scarcely knows Jesus, seeks mercy.

Our gospel reading this morning recounts this story, beginning with the words “Jesus withdrew to the region of Tyre and Sidon”. Was Jesus going there with his disciples for a weekend break by the seaside? No. Was he running scared, going into hiding across the border to escape the building pressure? No

No. none of these. For Jesus was going out of Israel into Gentile territory to meet a Canaanite woman. And this was no chance meeting, it was planned. Jesus was going to the region to the north of Israel to heal her daughter and in so doing he will teach his disciples and us a very important lesson.

‘A Canaanite woman came to Jesus crying out “Lord, Son of David, have mercy on me! My daughter is suffering terribly from demon possession.”’

Surely, she’s aware of the ancient rivalry between the Jews and the Canaanites going was back to the time of Joshua and the conquest of Israel. And yet, she acknowledges who he is, “Lord, Son of David, Messiah”. She’s desperate for her daughter and she cries out for mercy from this visiting Jewish king. But Jesus ignores her, he doesn’t say a word. And so, his disciples come to him and urge him, “Send her away, for she keeps crying out after us” – Jesus, just heal her daughter and get rid of her, she’s getting really annoying!”

It’s then Jesus responds, I can’t heal her, “I’m only sent to the lost sheep of Israel”. Jesus points out that his primary mission is only to Israel, but as the Jews increasingly reject him, so he turns occasionally to the Gentiles. Jesus must start with the Jews as prophesied through the Old Testament, but it won’t end there, his kingdom will eventually extend to all the world, eventually to each one of us. And in this incident and others like it, Jesus is setting a precedent that after his work on earth is finished, his disciples will follow with the result that each of us here today have come to know him.

Well, there’s no way this woman is going to be put off with Jesus’ dismissal of her need. “Lord, help me” she cries. To which Jesus responds, “It is not right to take the children’s bread and toss it to their dogs.” It’s not right to take what is for the Jews and give it to the Gentiles”. And the woman gives that marvellous answer, “Yes, Lord, but even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master’s table”

And Jesus honours her faith, faith that seeks mercy. She had no resentment, no anger about her situation; she only knew that Jesus was the Jewish Messiah who came to heal people, and for some reason he was in her town. She sought mercy from Him. And Jesus responds with emotion “O woman – you have great faith”. And her faith is rewarded, her daughter is healed.

This brief glimpse into the life of Jesus tells us something about the grace of our Lord and about people who are in need.

Jesus is not playing games with this woman. He didn't go all the way to her region to avoid her! But as the Jews to whom he was sent growingly reject him he makes it clear that the grace of God will be available to Jews and eventually to the Gentiles, to all people. It took a bit for the disciples to understand this, some years later you find them in Acts 15 meeting to decide if the Gospel had in truth gone to the Gentiles. And thank God, they followed Jesus' precedent, or we would not be here today. This is for us as well. For we also are to take the message of grace to the world, to whoever is seeking mercy.

I work for Presbyterian Support Otago and this story speaks to what Presbyterian Support does and what I do, what you as a church do and what you as individual Christians do. Each of us are to take the message of grace to the world to show Gods mercy to those in need, no matter who or what they are. As a Church, collectively you are doing this, working as a community, doing together what is difficult to achieve as individuals.

At Presbyterian Support Otago, we are also doing this, hopefully in partnership with you and with many other churches and Christians in the Otago region. We are sharing Jesus' love, his grace and mercy to people of all ages to bring about positive change in the lives of people, of families and of communities. Much of what we do is not possible for individuals on their own or even for churches by themselves, nor is it possible to us at Presbyterian Support to do by ourselves. We can only do it partnering in mercy with you and with others, adding our specific focus, our specialist knowledge and training.

I've been part of Presbyterian Support for just over five years and I'm part of Family works, that's the part which supports children, youth and families. The other part is Enliven with its services to older people. At Family Works, I juggle two jobs, and in both, in various ways, I'm showing God's mercy to those in need.

My first job is to run part of the Total Money Management programme. I look after the finances of long term mental health patients who are unable to look after part or all of their money. Most of my clients spent time in Cherry Farm and other past mental health institutions and struggle with living in their communities.

But my job extends far beyond just looking after their money and budgeting, I've helped in moving homes, teaching how to shop and cook, dealt with lawyers, government officials and a whole host of things in order to help them survive everyday life. And I have to say that, many of my clients are not the people I would normally associate with, and at times it has been a real struggle and it's probably only my Christian faith and the past through life God has taken me on that has allowed me to show mercy to them. Several are regularly before the courts and sometimes have a stay in prison. Several are alcoholics and one occasionally indulges in prostitution to gain more alcohol. Some have struggled with drug addictions. One recently received an apology from the Ministry of Health for indecencies done to him while in state care. One is a recluse, being awake only at night, except for our weekly appointment which he combines with visits to the doctor, pharmacist and supermarket, before hurrying home, never

to be seen till the following week. I even have one client who is so obsessive compulsive that he at times buys groceries based not so much on what they are, but on the size and colour of the packet and how he can arrange it in his cupboard.

Working with my Total Money Management clients is often full of surprises and I am constantly having to remind myself that my clients are those that people avoid and society tries to forget, yet who live in our community. They may not be people we would want to associate with, but are they not people crying out for mercy? People whom we should show God's love and mercy?

My second and main job is working at YouthGrow at the end of North East Valley in Normanby Street. And you as a church had an important part in starting YouthGrow in 2001 and its continuing ministry. When it started it was an employment programme within a horticultural and nursery setting providing real work for real pay for 16 – 24 year olds, disadvantaged in the job market or facing barriers to employment.

YouthGrow has gone through a number of changes since then, some from choice, some because of changes in society and some forced on us. It's still set in a horticultural and nursery environment, but it goes beyond that. Now it's a Youth Development programme that takes youths from 14 – 25 years old and helps them to become life ready and work ready. Students are no longer paid, but they or their caregivers receive help through the benefit system. Youths, who come to us aged 14 and 15 are under Alternative Education. They are those who have struggled with school, in fact some have not or have rarely attended since Intermediate school, or have been expelled. And I must say, over the 3½ years I've been at YouthGrow, these have become increasingly difficult to deal with and all agencies dealing with similar aged youths in Dunedin are finding that same big increase in difficulty.

We also take youths 16 – 25 years old, many of whom have mental health problems, often anxiety and depression. During their time with us, which can be anything up to two years, we help all these youths develop life skills and job skills, we arrange job experience and hopefully help them into jobs or further education. We also teach literacy and numeracy as well as horticulture and can help them gain NCEA levels 1 and 2. Sadly, many of the youths are what they now are because of circumstances beyond their control and things they have had to deal with and things done to them in the past that no child should ever face. There are times, far too many, when working at YouthGrow is very hard and emotionally incredibly draining. Sometimes I struggle to remember that these are youths that need the love and mercy of God when I'm facing their explosive anger, a torrent of swear words, threats and abuse. Or, what I find harder, when I see potential and a youth refuses to realise it because so often they have had years of being told they are useless.

But then I look back over the years at YouthGrow for I have seen amazing change as youths have responded and developed, as they have gained skills, purpose, confidence and independence. And that makes it all worthwhile.

Of course, Family works is much more than Total Money Management and YouthGrow. There is the food bank, advocacy, budget advice, counselling, buddy programme, Stepping Stones,

community programmes and much more. We deal with many, many people in need, who come seeking help. Then there is Enliven, our services to older people and our residential aged care facilities. And Presbyterian Support Otago is even more than that but as my time is short. Let me take a short cut and ask you to make sure you get a copy of and read our latest magazine or check us out on the internet and Facebook. I'm also more than happy to talk further with you at the end of the service if you want to know more.

I want to ask you that as followers of Jesus Christ, as partner with us and with Jesus in mercy, and you can do that in many ways: -

A simple way is to keep in touch with what we are doing, through the People Magazine, Facebook and the internet. Use the information to pray regularly for us. We would really value your prayers. And a big need for prayer at YouthGrow is that we would be able to increase the number of older youths at YouthGrow who really want help developing work skills and getting employment, who can also become role models to our younger youth.

Help us with donations. We need money to be able to do what we are called to do. But it's not just money, our Foodbank always needs food as we are facing a marked increase in people needing food assistance. We collected just over 18,000 cans in the June Octacan appeal, but it won't be long before they are all gone.

Donate old clothing to our op shops, and purchase from them as well, you can often get a real bargain! And of course, buy plants from YouthGrow, either at Norwood Street, or from September, at the Farmers Market, we have an increasing selection of high quality plants, mainly grown by us, at very competitive prices. And every sale goes back into YouthGrow and helps the youths become life ready and work ready. Donate time, we can always use more volunteers with all sorts of talents and backgrounds. So, join with us, partnering in mercy, growing the kingdom.

The Canaanite woman cried out to Jesus, "Lord, help me" and Jesus responded with mercy.

Every day at Presbyterian Support we hear the cry, again and again. "Help me". Partner with us and help us respond with mercy. Thank you

---

## **KNOX CHURCH, DUNEDIN**

***growing in courage to live the Jesus way***



**Knox Church**  
449 George Street  
Dunedin  
New Zealand  
Ph. (03) 477 0229  
[www.knoxchurch.net](http://www.knoxchurch.net)

Kerry Enright: 027 467 5542, [minister@knoxchurch.net](mailto:minister@knoxchurch.net)