



# A CURIOUS CURE?

*Leaving that place, Jesus withdrew to the region of Tyre and Sidon. He entered a house and did not want anyone to know it; yet he could not keep his presence secret. In fact, as soon as she heard about him a Canaanite woman from that vicinity came to him, crying out, "Lord, Son of David, have mercy on me! My daughter is suffering terribly from demon-possession."*

*Jesus did not answer a word. So his disciples came to him and urged him, "Send her away, for she keeps crying out after us." He answered, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel."*

*The woman came and knelt before him. "Lord, help me!" she said. He replied, "It is not right to take the children's bread and toss it to their dogs."*

*"Yes, Lord," she said, "but even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table."*

*Then Jesus answered, "Woman, you have great faith! Your request is granted." And her daughter was healed from that very hour.*

*Matthew 15:21-28; Mark 7:24-30*

The setting of this encounter is Lebanon, which was under the joint control of Rome and Syria; Jesus was able to stay with some Jews who lived there. He had gone away from Israel for a break but even so word got around, and this woman managed to push her way in.

Preachers use this story to talk about the 'great faith' of this woman. However, most hurriedly skate over Jesus' extraordinary and apparently inexplicable behaviour, which at first (and even second) sight comes across as being dismissive, dishonest and insulting - uniquely so of the 23 recorded healings. So why did he treat this woman in such an out-of-character way?

Was he annoyed about having had his holiday disturbed? Was he grumpy after a bad night's sleep? Had some local kebabs disagreed with him? Before seeking a better explanation, let us acknowledge the difficulties:

*Firstly*, Jesus initially completely ignored her. But this contrasts starkly with the welcome he offered the Samaritan woman even though this too was socially taboo.<sup>1</sup>

*Secondly*, he misled her by suggesting that Gentiles were not in his game plan. But this contrasts with what he already knew<sup>2</sup> and had proclaimed in his home synagogue - where he actually

specified Sidon and Syria<sup>3</sup> - and it also contrasts with his ready welcome to the Gentile centurion.<sup>4</sup>

*Thirdly*, he effectively called her 'a dog', a common term that Jews used for Gentiles. But this contrasts with the attention, honour and compassion (remarkably anti-cultural) that Jesus displayed to women on every other occasion.

How do we explain this? It is important to realise that Jesus quickly saw that this woman was desperate and had no intention of taking 'No' for an answer. He certainly would not have behaved this way towards a shy and deferential woman who might have run away at the first sign of being unwelcome.

It is often forgotten that this incident did not involve only Jesus and the woman - *the disciples were there too*. They had previously shown their prejudices against women<sup>5</sup> and the disabled,<sup>6</sup> and now their hostile views of Gentiles were clearly shown when they tried to get rid of this foreigner; their attitudes reflected their Jewish upbringing, culture and theology. By behaving as he did, Jesus clearly and forcefully reflected back to them their own ungodly prejudices, exposing the way that they would have behaved (and as the woman must have anticipated). When Jesus does speak words of healing there is no reluctance but rather a celebration of her having sought him out. Indeed we can imagine that, having quickly assessed her personality, Jesus looked at her and spoke with her in a quizzical way, to encourage her to continue with her pleas; and it is very possible that he was laughing along with her by the end.

In our consultations it is very easy for our approach to be immediately coloured by prejudice. This might be related to race, class, employment status, appearance; it might include alcoholics, refugees, drug addicts, smokers, homosexuals, the obese, unmarried mothers and so on. We need to search our hearts and minds to recognise and acknowledge our own biases, lest we (like the disciples) treat the patient as less than human.

*Andrew Miller is a retired general physician who divides his time between medico-legal work, medical education at a Christian hospital in Egypt, and being a Street Pastor*

## references

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|-----------------|-----------------|--------------|
| 1. John 4:7, 27 | 3. Luke 4:16-27 | 5. John 4:27 |
| 2. Isaiah 42:6  | 4. Mark 8:5-13  | 6. John 9:2  |



# THE IMPORTANCE OF PRAYER

**P**rayer must be the heartbeat of our Christian lives. Yet a lack of uninterrupted time coupled with secular work environments conspires to limit opportunity. Guilt felt at not being able to pray can be insidious and heavy. I hope the following Scriptures and reflections are of use to those struggling.

When I read the Psalms or the book of Job, I'm reminded of a lesson we must re-learn throughout our Christian lives. This is that God can 'take' whatever we throw at him – whether anger, doubt, grief, apathy or despair. Our starting point in prayer must be echoing St Paul's confidence to go boldly before the throne of grace.<sup>1</sup> Of course, as with any interpersonal relationship, details of how, when and where we communicate will vary according to character.

To come before God, ideally we need a mindset of both joy and surrender. I find it helpful to write down on a plain page everything that I am thankful for. This can and should include anything that comes to mind – from making it to a meeting on time, the taste of tea, the smell of cut grass or a correct management decision. Our daily readings, in reminding us of God's works, should be a point of joy. Likewise a prayer journal can be a source of joy as we realise previous prayers have been answered. Joy is described by Lewis as 'the serious business of Heaven'.<sup>2</sup> Joy is second only after love in St Paul's fruit of the Spirit characteristics,<sup>3</sup> yet joy is often underrated. Our joy in Christ is great, and we must draw on it. Psalm 1 describes the situation of the righteous – as 'trees planted near a stream, which always have leaves, produce fruit in season and succeed in everything that they do'. There are so many ways of encountering the joyous nature of God across different art-forms. I've been grateful recently for a photo of a favourite stained-glass window, and an ipod full of ancient and modern hymns! Small reminders we set for ourselves can be surprisingly helpful. I know a friend who keeps his debit card behind a Bible quotation card; every time he pays for anything by card he has to read the verse. Another uses scriptural phrases as computer passwords (He1srisen!).

To reach a mindset of surrender is as important. 'Blessed are the poor in Spirit' – only through acknowledging our spiritual poverty can we be blessed by communion with God. Just as writing a quick list of things we are thankful for can be useful for realising joy, so writing a list worries can be of benefit; again, including a whole spectrum – whether large issues or ones seemingly trivial. I believe

strongly that if an issue matters to us, it matters to God, even if it is a distraction that should be recognised as such. Reading through our list of worries/distractions, we can then surrender each one to God. In my experience, high on the list is neglect of prayer itself(!); as with any issue we can submit it to God, trusting in his strength to help us.

## To come before God, ideally we need a mindset of both joy and surrender

There is no escaping the reality that finding time for prayer is difficult. Of course, we may pray at any time in our thoughts, but it is important to grow an alertness as to who/what needs to be prayed for. One train of thought is as follows: each person on earth is in need of prayer; therefore, for each person we come across, our question to ourselves should be, 'What is it that I should pray for them?' Salvation for non-believers, and development of believers' love should be a high priority, but we must not neglect physical needs; clinical safety, multidisciplinary team workings and colleagues' health are worthy matters to pray about.

There was a story written where an old explorer found a great and powerful treasure of an ancient age, though none knew what became of it. The explorer went on to instruct his daughter to take care of a rescued orphan. The treasure eluded many who searched. Ultimately, the 'treasure' was in fact the orphan himself, a survivor of a powerful race. Likewise, the person of Christ is the aim, substance and outcome of prayer. Augustine of Hippo wrote: 'You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you.' Christ is our joy, our strength and our song; we must be determined to meet him regularly.

*Andrew Flatt is an ST3 in Microbiology*

*If there is a topic you would like to see in future editions of Juniors' Forum or if you would like to contribute to future articles then please contact Katherine Brown, Juniors' Forum editor, on katwin@doctors.org.uk*

### references

1. Hebrews 4:16
2. CS Lewis, *Letters to Malcolm*
3. Galatians 5:22
4. Matthew 5:3