

In the end all that matters is faith acting through love.

And this is faith.

Knowing I am not worthy to look up to the height of heaven, •
because of the multitude of my iniquities.

And yet bending the knee of my heart before you, •
imploring your kindness upon me.

Knowing, unworthy as I am, you will save me, •

according to the Immeasurable and unsearchable greatness of your promised mercy,

(Song of Manessah)

The Wilderness. Whatever it signifies for human cultures generally - absence, emptiness, exile, separation from what sustains life - for Christians in Lent, it represents one thing above all. Transition. The 40 days of Lent, of course, echo Christ's 40 days in the wilderness, but they also, like that period itself, reflect Moses' 40 days of fasting before receiving the Law on Sinai, and Elijah's before encountering the presence of God in the still small voice; as well as the 40 days of rainfall in the flood before the new covenant with Noah, and the Israelites own 40 years in the wilderness between slavery and the land of the promise...

In other words, the 40 days of Lenten Wilderness reflect a sort of threshold, a zone of movement in two directions, a transitional space, that both precedes, and is part of, the shift to an entirely new kind of relating, between God, and the child, or children, of God.

Simply put the Wilderness represents the frontier - the borders of the new life, and the process by which it comes to be inhabited...

So perhaps we shouldn't be surprised to find on this threshold, questions of inside and outside - of ingress and egress, possession and dispossession.

The Collect today addresses our need outwardly and inwardly of power outside ourselves, Jeremiah wants to speak to us of heart and root - the inner core, and of fruit and flourishing - the outer manifestation; and of the danger of mistaking the surface for the source. Whilst the Epistle wants our lives to overflow more and more with the new life, but insists that this overflowing involves a determination to never overstep or overreach our bounds.

And the Gospel - unfolding itself *on* the very fringes of the promised land deals with a stranger - or more accurately an exile - a Canaanite - daring to come to the table of God's children, to approach the tabernacle of Israel. And with what seems at first glance to be the most narrow minded and exclusive statement, to cross the lips of the one hailed just a few weeks ago - as the champion of inclusion - the light to the Gentiles, the hope of the Nations...

So what lies within this curious exchange, which from the outside seems so alien to the Jesus we are familiar with? What are we to make of this tension between exclusion and embrace? And what has that same tension to say to us about the frontier of the new life, and our entry into it this Lent?

The first thing to recognise about this story from Matthew's Gospel is that it is a very carefully constructed one. It is not just that this woman happens to have a demon possessed daughter, as opposed to one who is sick, or leprous, or dying; nor is it just that she happens to be a Cannanite, or that Jesus happens to meet her in Tyre and Sidon.

This is a wilderness story - a threshold story about incursion and expulsion, and the double movement of reconciliation - and as such about the miraculous process by which the whole world is being taken into the Kingdom of God, that is expanding in its midst, driving out impurity as it goes. And each element of Matthew's account is designed to open the heart of that process to us and invite us into it...

The problem that this woman brings to Christ is our problem, and the problem of creation itself. There is something inside that which is most precious, which is evil, toxic, destructive. A devil in her daughter. Sin - ruinous selfishness - in our hearts. Rottenness in the World. Decay in the place of the vital organs of creation. The dilemma is that getting rid of the evil cannot be at the expense of destroying the precious thing it is polluting. Somehow something else has to supplant the usurping presence, to get behind the barbed poison and drive it out from within...

Now Cannanites know something about being driven out, about a usurping presence. Because these are the people driven out of the promised land by Israel. But perhaps this woman knows more than that, perhaps she also knows that in Israel's inhabiting of the land promised to Abraham, there is the beginning of an invasion designed to ultimately embrace the whole earth. To 'bless all nations' (Gen22:28). Perhaps somehow she knows that just as they had the faith of Abraham as their source, the people of Israel were to have at their centre a pure presence of God which would possess *them* and drive out from *them* all impurity, precisely so as to repossess the world and maintain at its heart a pure wellspring of life.

This wellspring was to be first in the form of the Tabernacle and its Ark, then in the form of the temple, and in both cases in the Holy of Holies, the beachhead of heaven on earth - the point where the Divine Life invades and recaptures the very heart of the (polluted) created order.

Perhaps she knew, even, that the miraculous work of this purifying presence was always a kind of metabolism. A process that consisted in it gathering from the very creation it was transforming, the impure material that it would sanctify to become the vehicle of its transforming work.

The Gold and fabrics that made the Tabernacle under Moses was from heathen Egypt. And the Gold that made the temple under Solomon the Son of David, was from well it was from here. From where she is from. From this threshold of the Promised Land. From Tyre and Sidon - and the Phoenecian King Hiram.

Perhaps she knew that this very land they stood on was what had been gifted to Hiram by the Son of David, and even knew that Hiram wasn't satisfied with it - that he called it Cabul - the offscourings of Solomon's Kingdom - the crumbs from the table of the King of the Jews which he considered beneath him...

I say perhaps. Because it is certainly peculiar that this Phoenecian woman seeking the one who can drive out the usurping presence of evil, comes - in the place where a Phoenecian had spurned the overflow of Solomon's Table and thereby his inclusion in the promised land, and says please will you include me in the Promise. Please Son of David will you allow me to partake of the promise through which all that is not God, is driven out of the beloved creation, and all that was not holy is made holy?

It is certainly striking that when he says I have to change the world from the inside out, and that means changing Israel from the inside out, I have to cleanse - usurp finally - the temple itself - I can't start from the outside and work inwards, she agrees - it was always so. But it has also always been the nature and purpose of the promise to overflow, and to incorporate, to draw in and redeem, as part of its work of transformation, that which is outside itself. There have always been gleanings and scraps and crumbs of the bread master breaks, for those not yet of his household, and they have always been more than enough.

Who can know what she knew, but we can see what she did.

Like the woman who knows even the fringes of his outermost clothing is holy enough to heal, she does the only thing that faith consists in. The thing by the way the desert might well bring out of you. She holds up her emptiness and says we have no power of ourselves to help ourselves, but your power is such that even the tiniest scrap of it like yeast can invade and transform everything. And what is more though I know I have no right of myself to share in it, I believe it's invitation extends even to me.

This is the posture of faith - bending the knee of the heart in recognition of both our limit and the limitless nature of Gods loving kindness - the offering of what we are, by offering what we lack and the grateful receiving of what we need. Like the eyes of a handmaid looking expectantly to the hands of her mistress or a little dog to the edge of the masters table this is the posture of one who can be changed from the very core of their being and made a partaker of the promise...

And it is the beginning. The frontier. The point of entry for all into the New Life.

But it is not the end. Or rather it is not just a solitary transaction.

It is just part of a process of humble self emptying and an unlimited filling - which is eternal, and which can become correspondingly constant in any human life - a process which the Apostle Paul exhorts the Thessalonians to continue in ever more and more.

The new life - the life of promise - is far more extraordinary than we give it credit for. The wisest of us recognise, like the Canaanite, our need of it, the inability of our flesh alone to supply the nourishment we require, the need to be rooted and established in something else. The wisest of us realise that we must not put what is designed to be filled in the role of *doing* the filling, or we will simply lock an emptiness within: we must master the vessel, the container of our selves, our bodies - the matter that is the means of all our interactions - keep it in its proper place as container and vehicle, so that it can be filled with the only thing that could sustain it, the thing for which it exists. Divine love.

The point of Christian exorcism - of the driving out of evil - is never the driving out of things or people, but of an attitude towards things and people, that turns them from being the vessels and vehicles of love into the very things that cut us off from it.

The point of the new life, is not to be free of external things, not to become immaterial, not ultimately to drive out and exclude at all. But to drive out those external things that have falsely become internal, to place at the centre the source of life, the only eternal reality, so that everything - all things - can be gathered in, incorporated in its vital rhythm of giving and receiving.

The wilderness of Lent is a place of driving out, but it is no less a place of radical inclusion. And perhaps we would think more clearly about the sort of exorcism that is at the heart of lent if we thought about in terms of metabolism or of breathing. In breathing the external is taken in transformed and poured out in a life giving exchange. The presence of what was external is welcome but not if it tries to stay there. Then it must be driven out, to make way, to make the space for that life giving flood of pure air...

So with the driving out of the nations from Israel, it was never for the purpose of exclusion, any more than the driving out of humanity from Eden was for the exclusion of humanity, but only ever for their rightful inclusion, in the great banquet at the consummation of history, by virtue of replacing at the centre that life giving exchange - that love - by which alone all things can flourish...in which alone all things can be incorporated.

Ultimately it is fitting that an excluded Canaanite should be the one brought in to teach Israel about what is truly at the centre of the cosmos, and who is really being included by it; so it is appropriate that we should in Lent be learning to fast - to temporarily exile - those things which are not core for us. The physical and material things which contain life, but to which life is not to be reduced. But it is crucial that lent is a fasting preparation for a feast - not finally about excluding those things, but pushing them out to their proper place to make space, for the true life that should inhabit them, in order to include and animate them.

In the end, in the Life of Promise there are neither insiders nor outsiders, but simply faith acting through love. In the end, to the pure all things are pure. But in entering into that promise, we are called to imitate the faith of this exiled woman, not to stay by ourselves for we cannot survive alone, and the poison is already at work in what is most precious; not to take for ourselves and so drag into us that which was meant to contain us, and exclude the only thing that can sustain us; not to keep for ourselves, for in so doing the food we require becomes rotten and useless, but instead, motivated by love, to acknowledge our status as natural outsiders, and recognise that we are nonetheless, amazingly, welcomed - invited - to partake of the life of the Holy of Holies - to eat from the masters table and to gratefully respond, to receive all things with thanksgiving and give away all things with generosity. To become, by faith, part of the process that is even at this 'very hour' making all things whole.