

*A Reflection on the Readings for 20th Sunday in Ordinary
Time Year A*

For about twenty odd years I was employed as a Manager of Human Resources. Prior to that role I managed a group of people who looked after a communications network for the state electricity power grid. One of our radio operators used to work as a mobile intensive care ambulance paramedic. Occasionally he used to share some of the experiences of being with people in life and death situations. As far as I was aware he wasn't an overtly religious person, but who knows, often people with deep faith don't seem to wear their faith as a badge of honour. I do recall, however, he was fond of a turn of phrase and now and again would use the expression "there are no atheists in the trenches", I asked him what he meant by this and he said in his long career with the ambulances and being sent to the most difficult and often tragic cases, nearly all of those he treated either cried out to God or for their mothers. Well I thought to myself at the time that whilst this was certainly this ex paramedic's lived experience, crying out in extremis is most likely a fairly crude indicator of intrinsic faith or belief. As I remember this story today, it seems to me that there is one take away thought of relevance to today's gospel teaching, and that is for all of us, even those of us surrounded constantly by love, sooner or later we will be alone, or will feel completely alone, experiencing circumstances beyond our control or that of those who care for us, then who do we turn to?

I wonder, have you ever prayed about something intensely and felt like no one was listening? Have you earnestly cried out to God and nothing seems to change, have you been tempted to just give up?

Well I tread warily in this space, I know that you will often hear advice to simply persevere. As if somehow you are to blame, that there is something you are doing wrong, you're not good enough, you have got to change your ways or you can't expect God to listen to what you have to say or answer your petitions. My sense is that this idea and view tends to devalue or diminish God's love for us and his creation, I think we need to look beyond such a narrow perspective.

One of the key things that strikes me about prayer, speaking with God, is that it is part of a great mystery, a hugely complex mystery concerning not just my immediate needs, as important as these are, but factors such as salvation history, those patterns of events in human history that reveal God's saving plan for us all. When we say our God is the God who saves, we're saying that salvation comes to imply the rescue of the whole person, body and spirit, and also that of all creation. This is certainly big picture stuff!

So it is within the nature of prayer that it can sometimes feel like being in a long distance marathon, it does require of us endurance, it does require us to keep on keeping on, and not giving up at the first or later hurdles, prayer takes commitment, discipline, and self-sacrifice, and all of this is good for our relationship with God and for those for whom we pray.

This leads me to think can we really and honestly answer the question why doesn't God answer my prayers?. Perhaps you have the answers... but I for one am not sure why God answers some prayers and not others, but I do believe and trust that God hears all of our prayers and we are not alone in this mystery of seeming silence. Scripture is full of stories of those who prayed and then waited for a response, or even those who prayed and got the response that they didn't really want. There's a larger

picture unfolding towards which I feel I will not fully comprehend the answers, this side of heaven,.. God willing. It would really require us to know the mind of God! Perhaps it should be enough for now that faith requires me to trust even when it doesn't make complete sense and simply rest with the assurance that I have a friend in Jesus, no matter what.

I am reminded of a song that was very popular when I was young man, it was written and sung by Carole King back in 1969 for her friends, a married couple, Cynthia Weil and Barry Mann when she moved away. It is simply called *'You've Got a Friend,'* I will leave you with some of the lyrics at the end of this reflection, but for now I want to spend a few moments illustrating what I have been speaking of so far by putting a personal face on what is a rather a theological discussion, and I believe this will be very much assisted by today's readings.

Our gospel today has at its heart a woman simply petitioning Jesus, not for herself but for her daughter who she will do anything and everything within her capacity to do so, but her daughter's illness is clearly beyond her, so she cries out in desperation. But as we have already indicated there is a complexity in this heartfelt petition which is beyond the scope of this woman's simple petition. There is certainly a strong theme of relationship building and the development of a new sense of inclusivity, an 'outsider' becoming an 'insider,' and beyond this important impact on the individual, there is the big picture stuff of the extension of the mission of the church beyond the perceived boundaries and limitations of the time. It is very much concerned with the complexities of which I have spoken. There is a lot at stake and a lot going on in this story of an 'outsider' woman petitioning Jesus.

If you feel initially troubled by the apparent aloofness that Jesus displays towards this desperate woman then the evangelist Matthew has done his job well. The story develops and builds in stages, there is an intensification of drama as the barriers between the Jews and the Gentile differing worldviews are tested.

Here we have the 'insider' disciples wanting simply to get rid of this 'outsider' this troubling woman. The mission is restricted to 'the lost sheep of the house of Israel and it seems that there will be no movement or development away from this position... until something really beautifully human occurs. Something which should have the power to move us all!

This unnamed Canaanite woman, comes before Jesus and kneels down before him and simply begs Jesus, 'Lord, help me'!

But again the tension rises as Jesus refuses her a third time. There is no insult here however in this exchange of dialogue. The word used for dog is the same word used for beloved household pet. This is not an expression of contempt, but rather a question of priority, children are always fed first and later the dogs receive the scraps that are left over. In spite of being rejected several times the woman is not discouraged, she maintains steadfast in her request to the Lord and Jesus responds to her. He describes her faith as a confidence shown in repeated requests, faith as nothing other than trust in Jesus, her request is granted, her daughter is healed. Jesus has not confined God and has extended the mission of the nascent Church and is still moved by the simple but profound faith of the gentile woman.

But what might we in Ferntree Gully, take away from the story today? I will leave you with one important thought for these exceptional times.

Looking at this gospel then and now, one thing I do know for certain is that prayer and petition whilst very much personal is always offered within a community. One important thing Covid19 is reminding us of is that we were never meant to live life alone. God created us to live in community. Jesus didn't try to do life alone, he had disciples and followers. We need God and we need each other. We need people in our life who support us unconditionally so we can be comfortable sharing who we really are, unvarnished, being vulnerable and honest, when things get tough the last thing we should do is withdraw and try to go it alone.

When we feel challenged by the thought of why doesn't God seem answer my prayers, remember then the story of the Canaanite woman and countless others in scripture and know you are not alone and realise that this is the time to draw closer into community and not away from it,because you've got a friend! I finish today with the lyrics I promised earlier, they quite fittingly can be related to our friends, but also Jesus I think.

*When you're down and troubled
And you need some loving care
And nothing, nothing is going right
Close your eyes and think of me
And soon I will be there
To brighten up even your darkest night*

*You just call out my name
And you know wherever I am
I'll come running
To see you again
Winter, spring, summer or fall
All you have to do is call
And I'll be there
You've got a friend*

*If the sky above you
Grows dark and full of clouds
And that old North wind begins to blow
Keep your head together
And call my name out loud
Soon you'll hear me knocking at your door*

*You just call out my name
And you know wherever I am
I'll come running, a-running, yeah, yeah-eah
To see you again
Winter, spring, summer or fall
All you have to do is call
And I'll be there
Yes I will*

*Now ain't it good to know that you've got a friend
When people can be so cold
They'll hurt you, yes, and desert you
And take your soul if you let them
Oh, but don't you let them*

*You just call out my name
And you know wherever I am
I'll come running, a-running, yeah, yeah-eah
To see you again
Winter, spring, summer or fall
All you have to do is call
And I'll be there, yes I will (oh, yes I will)*

***You've Got a Friend
Carole King***