

17 August 2014

Sometimes, events of the week give context to my homily. Early on Wednesday morning, my grandmother, Domenica, died at 90 years of age after a brief period of illness. She lived a remarkable life of relatively good health, fierce independence, watching with joy as her grandchildren took their respective paths in life. We admired her enormously and loved her dearly. My grandmother, like many of her contemporaries, belonged to a tough generation. They had known many hardships and challenges in life but always had this extraordinary determination to get on with the job and never be defeated. My grandmother was also a woman of great faith. Even though most of her grandchildren don't get to Sunday Mass too often, many of them commented on how she used to pray the rosary every day and every night and flip through her various prayer books and devotions. They remembered their grandmother as a woman of faith and prayer.

In today's Gospel, Jesus encounters a Canaanite woman. Canaanites are non-believers and yet this woman is so desperate for Jesus to heal her daughter that he detects within her heart the great gift of faith. A non-believer 'believing'. This is a classic case where the Gospel turns our expectations upside-down. Jesus is not in the presence of the theological scholars, the priestly and educated class, the religious authorities of the time. He is in the presence of a non-believing woman moved by faith to seek out the gift of his healing love and peace. Jesus responds with love and generosity to this request and the woman is granted her wish. Her daughter is now healed and she is set free from worry and anxiety. As I have mentioned before, before the bible goes to religious and faith questions, it deals with the human reality. Jesus spends most of his ministry dealing with human reality into which he speaks lessons of faith. The religious authorities ignore him; but the people of simple faith respond. And the lesson that the Gospels always make clear is that the grace of faith is often at work in the lives of the least expected – the poor, the outcast, the marginalized, the non-believer. This is the very group that Jesus spends most of his time with, the ones that he declares are close to the kingdom of God.

The Old Testament often appeals to the grace of this sincere, simple and honest faith. The prophet Isaiah calls out in the Lord's name for

people to act with justice and integrity. How often does God speak through the prophet Isaiah reminding the people that speaking lots of prayers while ignoring the call to act with justice does not please God at all. In fact, God reminds them that he turns his ear to the poor, the needy, the widow and the marginalised. Because their faith is simple, honest and sincere; these are the ones that God brings to his holy mountain, these are the ones who will be joyful in his house of prayer.

The woman turns to Jesus with sincerity and humility. Humility is the virtue at the heart of the ministry of Pope Francis and probably the one most difficult to practice in the Christian life. But it gets us to the heart of the Gospel message. The simplicity and genuine humility of Pope Francis is worth more than a thousand theology books. Only recently he said, 'The power of grace comes alive and flourishes to the extent that we, in faith, go out and give ourselves and the Gospel to others, giving what little anointment we have to those who have nothing'. The one who is considered 'small' in the eyes of the world is actually the one who is really 'great' in God's eyes. The humble person transforms the world with grace and goodness. The bible is loaded with stories of how God works through the humble in order for the message of salvation to be known.

We who gather to celebrate the Eucharist as disciples of Jesus hear and know this call to humble service. We respond in faith and prayer; we respond with the gift of our lives. In this celebration, may our faith be strengthened; may our faith increase.