

WEEK 3: WEDNESDAY

Let's listen in on this conversation. Stand in the crowd and see what you think.

We're up north now, away from Galilee. Jesus has already spoken of this region ('the district of Tyre and Sidon') in such a way as to make it clear that he and his Jewish hearers thought of it as non-Jewish, beyond the pale (11.21). Now he's come here, we're not sure why; perhaps to escape, for a while, the controversy hanging in the air after his previous exchange with the Pharisees (15.1—20).

As we watch from the sidelines, suddenly a local woman comes out of the crowd and starts shouting at Jesus. 'Take pity on me, son of David!' Her daughter, it seems, is in a terrible state, tormented by evil spirits. 'Take pity on me, son of David!'

A whisper goes through the crowd. 'Son of David?' That's serious talk. The Jews, down south, may be looking for a coming king, but what would that have to do with us non-Jews? Clearly the woman is desperate. Mothers in the crowd know exactly how she feels. They'd do anything to get help if it was their daughter. Still the woman goes on, 'Take pity on me, son of David!'

We watch to see what's going to happen, but Jesus and his friends are moving on and he's not saying anything. Finally his friends have had enough. 'Tell her to go away! She's shouting after us!' This is a puzzle. We in the crowd thought Jesus was a healer. Why doesn't he heal the little girl? And why don't his followers want him to?

Then, at last, Jesus speaks, and what he says sends a chill through the crowd. 'I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.' 'Well,' mutters someone close by, 'so what are you doing here, then? Why come to us if you don't want to help us too?'

We, remembering the previous conversation, may have an answer to that; it was wise to lie low for a bit. And, having followed Jesus for some time now, we realize that what he just said fits with what he had said to the Twelve in 10.5—6: don't go to the Gentiles, only to Israel. Jesus was strongly aware of a commission, a solemn charge he'd received from his Father. His job was to announce God's rule to his own people, the Jews. If he began to preach and teach more widely, the Jews would write him off as a traitor. They would never then discover that he had come to fulfil their deepest hopes.

But then the woman comes right up to Jesus and kneels down before him. We hold our breath as the crowd quietens down to listen. 'Lord, help me!'

Then a gasp of horror at Jesus' response. 'It isn't right to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs.' Dogs! That's what some Jews called non-Jews. Surely Jesus doesn't think in those terms? It's as though he's struggling within himself; he knows what his commission had been and doesn't want to be disloyal, disobedient. What he has to give, he must give to God's ancient people; they must never be able to say that their own coming king ignored them and went elsewhere. And yet . . . he had already said that many would come from east and west and sit down with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Could it be that this future promise was already starting to come true, even before he'd finished his mission to Israel?

Normally, when we listen in to conversations Jesus is having, it's other people who set the thing up with comments or questions and Jesus who gives the brilliant punchline. This time it's the other way round. The woman accepts Jesus' point of view and turns it to her own advantage. 'Yes,' she says, 'but the dogs under the table eat what the children drop!' We feel the buzz in the crowd. Great line! Well said! Nice job! And Jesus seems to agree. 'You have great faith! As you wish, so let it be done.' And the girl is healed.

And we are left thinking: is that what we mean by faith? Faith to see how God's strange plan works, even though it isn't exactly flattering for us? Faith to cling on to everything Jesus says even when it's unexpected, and to pray in those terms rather than assume he's going to do what we want in the way we want it?

Jesus makes to leave. His eyes swing slowly round the crowd, and they pause for a moment on you. 'What is it you want from me, then?' he seems to be saying. 'Have you got enough faith to see God's strange plan working its way out and find what you need within it?'

TODAY

Sovereign Lord, give us the faith to ask for your help, and the humility to receive it on your terms.