

## Homily for 20<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year A)

The other morning I was sat at a set of traffic lights for a very long time. How long? Well, in the time I sat there, along with a load of other drivers, the lights changed from red to green and back again three times. Ordinarily we would all have driven off once the lights had changed to green but none of us could do so because the car in front of us held a learner driver. Perhaps it was her first lesson or maybe she had yet to master the delicate art of pressing down on the accelerator whilst lifting your other foot off the clutch. Again and again when the lights changed to green this poor learner stalled the engine causing the car to lurch forward and stop.

None of the drivers behind her, including myself, showed any obvious signs of road rage. No horns were blown, no screams of frustration were heard - perhaps we were all busy remembering when we learnt to drive. That whole experience is one where you really learn the truth in the saying, 'if at first you don't succeed, try, try and try again.' That proverbial saying, dating I understand from the mid-nineteenth century, might have been coined by the woman who meets with Jesus in this Sunday's gospel.

The Canaanite woman is desperate for her daughter to be healed from the cruel torment of a demon. Such desperation has driven her to Jesus. Perhaps he was recommended by a neighbour or she may have been impressed by what she had earlier seen of him. Ignoring the social divide which then existed between her people, the Canaanites, and his people, the Jews, this woman shouts to him for help. She is ignored. She shouts again and is dismissed. The woman's persistence though pays off and on her third try at seeking the help of Jesus the Lord she succeeds; the evangelist telling us, and from that moment her daughter was well again (15:28). Another example of how true is the saying, 'if at first you don't succeed try, try and try again.'

This Sunday's gospel is primarily a healing story. It is followed by further such stories all of which the evangelist tells so that we will identify Jesus as the son of David, the royal Messiah sent to Israel, especially to heal those who in the eyes of society count for nothing. To hear these stories of healing may lead to our identifying what demons and torments we need to be healed from. We are wise to name them to the Lord in prayer but we should not forget also to tell him the demons that afflict our homes, our families, our friends indeed society as a whole.

Not for nothing do we pray at Mass each Sunday for the needs of the Church, the world and ourselves and end this time with a period of silent prayer. The place of the intercessions in our Sunday Mass is when we can especially bring to the Lord both ourselves and those who in the eyes of society count for nothing. We may have to pray for what we want again and again echoing the prayer of the psalmist, 'may God still give us his blessing till the ends of the earth revere him. (Ps 66: 8) Sometimes it can seem that our prayers only meet with the equivalent of a traffic light on red. It would be easy to give up, to exhibit the signs of prayer rage ('what's the point, you never listen, it's no wonder most people don't believe in you'). It is then my brothers and sisters we should remember the woman from Canaan. First Jesus ignored her, then he dismissed her but undeterred her persistence before him got her what she wanted.

Why did Jesus treat her in such a dismissive manner? Why did he not immediately turn to hear her cry and give her what she wanted? I do not know but rather than being shocked by what may be a false interpretation of his behaviour, let us focus on what he recognises in this woman: he tells her, 'you have great faith' (15:27). Let me ask you, can the same be said of you? How much faith in God do you have right now? If you reply 'not much' then ask this Canaanite woman to pray for you. If you consider your faith is quite sufficient for your own needs then pray for those currently stuck at what they think is God's red light.

Persistence is as necessary in prayer, whether it be for our needs or the needs of others, as it is in learning to drive. The Canaanite woman in this Sunday's gospel proves this as does the young woman who kept us all waiting at the traffic lights the other morning. She did finally move off. None of us behind her honked our horns in congratulations. Perhaps we were all busy remembering the lesson we are apt to forget: that if at first we don't succeed, we must try, try and try again.