

A sermon by David Wilbourne for Trinity 13:

Dogs: Matthew 15:21-28

Ice melts at 0° Celsius, 32° Fahrenheit:

what is your melting point?

My Grandad used to work in Donkins steelworks at Chesterfield,

where melting points were dangerous places,

molten metal spitting about,

blinding you,

burning holes through you:

what is your melting point?

I guess Jesus' melting point

can be found in our Gospel for this morning.

The Canaanite woman, on the other hand,

wasn't so much at her melting point

as at her boiling point,

her daughter tormented by a demon,

grievously vexed by a devil

as it says so poetically in the Book of Common Prayer.

We'd call it epilepsy these days,

and in my last parish there was a marvellous doctor

who was called out to a secondary school,

where a girl had suffered an epileptic fit

during a netball match.

He wrote a poem about it all,

which he read out

in place of my sermon following this morning's gospel.

He had found the girl writhing on the floor,

foaming at the mouth,

surrounded by her dumb-struck classmates and PE teacher.

He had put her into a recovery position,
checked her airways were free,
made sure her tongue was protected from her clamping jaws.
Eventually she came out of it.
Then, as her classmates sniggered,
Dr Black noticed the final indignity:
a dark pool of liquid
seeping from her bottom half.

When he had finished reading his poem
so tenderly to our congregation,
you could have heard a pin drop.
Because of that poem
I asked him to be ordained.
With a bemused smile he declined: far too busy.
I didn't really mind,

because he was a priest in all but name.
In 1996 when David Hope was doing a grand tour
of his new archdiocese,
we visited a bustling village school:
sparkling children,
fresh-as-a-daisy displays,
smiling teachers.
I broke away and peeped behind a screen,
where a tiny little boy lay on a mat,
sleeping.
I asked the headmistress what was going on.
'Oh, he's a twin,'
she said,
as if it were normal for twins to sleep when archbishops called.
'He's prone to epileptic fits and is sleeping one off.'
I let the archiepiscopal roadshow strut on,

and just stood looking at the little lad,
my eyes filled with tears of sorrow,
epilepsy cruelly robbing this little chap
of his school's greatest day.

So the Canaanite woman with her epileptic daughter
would be at her boiling point,
desperate for any help,
shrieking after the disciples,
howling after the Jesus,
'Lord, help me!'
yet he seemed to find her invisible.
And then when he notices her,
he ain't that nice.
'I don't treat foreign scum!'
'You're a dog;

I'm a doctor, not a vet.'

'I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.

It is not fair to take the children's food

and to throw it to

THE DOGS!'

Not nice,

not nice at all.

All my life I've been haunted by Auschwitz

and the Holocaust

and the Final Solution,

when the Nazis treated the Jews as subhuman,

little more than animals to be herded together and incinerated.

Haunted

because I truly believe we are all God's children

and no one,

absolutely no one
should be written off.

So it comes as a considerable shock to see Jesus,
founder of my faith,
dismissing our woman from Cana
as a dog.

Think how utterly crushed
the Canaanite woman must have felt.
But rather than going off in a huff
she hangs on in there
and delivers the so-clever killer blow
which melts Jesus' heart:
'You're absolutely right, Lord,
yet even the dogs
eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table.'

She had the faith that even Christ's crumbs
would be enough to restore her daughter and her.
Reminiscent of another Gentile,
a Roman Centurion,
with his,
'Lord, I am not worthy that you should come under my roof,
but only say the word,
and your servant shall be healed.'
Words said quietly by a priest
just before he receives communion,
crumbs from Christ's table.

Was that the turning point,
the Canaanite woman's wit and persistence
warming Jesus' frozen heart,
Christ's melting point,

jump-starting him to look wider than Israel

and see himself as the very light for all the nations?

What is your melting point?

Does God have a melting point,

defrosted by our prayers,

our quite canny prayers?

Can we take a leaf from the Canaanite woman's book

and cry after God

and wrangle with him

with all our heart and soul, mind and strength...

...and sparky wit.

making prayer have the adventure

of a court-room cross-examination,

with a positively rabbinic precedent?

I often wonder about even extreme atheists like Richard Dawkins,

whether their otherwise inexplicable ceaseless tirade

is actually a sort of prayer,

having the audacity to prod God to be bigger

than the image they have encountered:

'It's not good enough that you're like this, Lord. Broaden!'

Taking our cue from the Canaanite woman,

we can even re-write the eventide and cup-final hymn:

'O thou who changest quite a lot,

Abide with me.'

And don't be offended about being cast as a dog

in Christ's eyes

and through the eyes of his chosen people.

Take solace from a poem by that great Father of the Church,

Father Potter of Peckham:

I wonder if Christ had a little brown dog,

One he felt was a pal, like mine.

With long silky ears and a nose soft and wet,

and eyes brown and tender that shine.

I don't think he did, because I read,

“Alone in the Garden he prayed,

When disciples and friends had left him and fled.”

I feel sure that his dog would have stayed...

As Archbishop John Habgood,

said when he was taking a service at my father's church

and encountered a woman whose little daughter had died,

‘Thank you so much for staying.’