

Jumping The Fence

In the Gospel there is a quite unmistakable seam of naughtiness. Jesus himself is the author of much of it. Its classical shape is the deflating of pompous or formalistic religion in favour of simplicity, and of the kind of relationship we find in families. He claims a certain freedom in respect of the Father's house. There's the places where he is accused of breaking the Sabbath, a grave sin in the eyes of Rabbis and Pharisees, especially because keeping the Sabbath meant telling the Gentiles where to get off. Jesus is accused of this crime when he heals suffering people; and the contrast is between the joyously healed, and the impassive legalism of the authority, for whom *keeping the rules* comes first and last. Jesus heals a woman with curvature of the spine, and elicits a denunciation from the synagogue president. He is angry: *Which of you, whose ox fell down a well, wouldn't pull him out on the Sabbath day? And was it not right that I free this daughter of Abraham, whom Satan has held bound these eighteen years, on the Sabbath day?* It's a righteousness which lies deeper than legalism; but it's also humanly subversive, revolutionary in the ears of his hearers. He is saying that even divinely-ordained custom can yield to the necessity of the moment.

The Son of Man – Master of the Sabbath

The frequency of Jesus' infringements of the Sabbath is something he not only recognises, but glories in; thus his invention of the title for himself: *Master of the Sabbath*. It's almost as if he wants his opponents to associate him with this particular piece of iniquity: as if they should think about it, and come to understand him by it. I sometimes wonder if his Galilean accent was another kind of badge; Galileans were widely-regarded as being too close to the Gentiles for their own good, and as likely to sit loosely to the keeping of religious rules. We know that Jesus and his disciples were conspicuously broad-speaking Northerners from the moment in the Passion where Peter is recognised: *You are another of them – your accent gives you away!* Did the Lord even emphasise his lowly reputation by exaggerating his accent?

The Syrophenician Woman

It remains all the more puzzling that Jesus should be so rude to this foreign woman, calling her (and her daughter) *little dogs*. St Augustine thought she

was a model for our praying, because she knew she was little more than a dog in the eyes of Jews, yet she asked Jesus for his help. By her very persistence, in the face of his negative response, she showed him unmistakably that she was no pagan dog. And Jesus acknowledges as much when he says, *O woman, great is your faith! Let your prayer be granted*. He began by calling her a dog, but he granted her prayer as a woman, and a woman of faith. Augustine said that Jesus wanted to elicit that faith. That is why he refused at first. This in itself, therefore, seems to be another example of Jesus' unconventional way of looking at life. He is unexpected, original. But if his abrupt answer to a woman in distress shocks us, his discovery of great faith in her is even more surprising.

The Woman of Samaria

Perhaps the mother in today's Gospel is echoed by John, in that woman who sat by Jacob's well. She was a Samaritan, surprised that Jesus, a Jew, should even notice her existence. He looks into her heart and sees all its chaos of disappointment and dishonour; but he is still determined to elicit her faith. Perhaps we should catch on to the meaning of these stories, simply by realising that Jesus is unconventional enough to see that even we are candidates for salvation. There isn't one of us who doesn't need a deepening of faith. Stop being a house-dog, he says. Start to believe, and start to pray.

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