

Sunday 16 August 2026 – 11 after Trinity
Genesis 45. 1-15; Matthew 15. 21-28

Recently I was visiting someone in the hospital, who is really inspiring in spite of having had multiple health problems and surgeries over his relatively short life so far. A friend had said to him “it’s fantastic you are fighting this dreadful disease”, to which he had replied “I am not fighting anything, I’m just looking after my body and its cells, thanks to the medical staff here at the hospital”. This exchange with me was accompanied by a very broad smile, and I thought this was a remarkable psychologically positive and optimistic take on his situation, which I told him. Incidentally, this patient is not at all religious. He is a successful businessman and has always been propelled forwards by optimism. This my way of dealing with situations, he said.

Do you remember Shirley Bassey ? Recently I watched a television documentary about the famous singer, who has now been in showbusiness for 70 years. The programme was showing excerpts from her many performances all over the world, including of course the theme from “Goldfinger” and “From Russia with Love”. The song which stuck in my mind, however, was “I did it my way” (originally a Frank Sinatra song), which she sang with such meaning, coming as it clearly did from her heart.

Shirley Bassey’s life was not a bed of roses, including two failed marriages, and the death of her elder daughter in unclear circumstances, quite apart from the ups and downs of a showbusiness lifestyle. Now, aged 89, she is the grand old lady of British song; in fact she has often been asked “why have you never been on stage or film ?” to which she would reply “Because I am a singer”. She has dealt with success and with life “in her way”.

You could say that we all do that. We are all born with certain characteristics in our make-up, which we use to help us manage life’s many different situations, to the extent we are able to, with greater or less success. Some of you will have been in hospital at some stage in your life, wondering how you managed to land up in a hospital bed, surrendering your independence to people you don’t know but who are tasked with restoring you to full health. Be inspired like Shirley Bassey and the patient I referred to earlier. You need all the strength and optimism and faith you can muster, until you can get well and return home.

This brings me to today’s Gospel reading, which is extraordinary for three reasons: firstly, the woman concerned is a Canaanite, not a Jew; secondly, her sheer determination on behalf of her mentally ill daughter; and thirdly, it is the

only example in the Gospels of someone answering Jesus back, not accepting what he has said. Even when she initially receives no answer at all, she doesn't give up. She gets in front of him and kneels, saying simply: "Lord, help me". Even that heart-felt appeal does not move him. On the contrary, Jesus insults her, firstly by saying in effect that he is interested only in the Jewish people, whom he has come to save. Her repeated appeal produces what can only be described as a callous dismissal, referring to the woman and other non-Jews as dogs. But this woman is equal to taking even that comment on the nose, and she cleverly parries his statement by saying that even dogs are grateful for anything they can snaffle from their master's table.

That finally softens Jesus's attitude, and he cures her daughter. He finally recognises that her faith in him is paramount, and he cannot deny it. You do wonder what was going on in his mind and heart, and it is his heart which wins out. This is helpful to us in everyday living. If a Muslim asked any of us to help in a situation, would we ignore it? Would our heart govern our decision, or otherwise? I have certainly walked past people appealing for money, and not knowing what they want the money for, try to react by getting them some food. Each situation is different and personal.

So the nameless Canaanite woman can teach all of us a lesson: determination and compassion, and unbeknown to her the Holy Spirit of God completes the equation by providing the solution to her request. So it is for us today, but not always in terms of what we have requested. There will always be another way, another solution, which the Spirit will provide for each one of us.