

I wonder if you have a picture in your head of what Jesus was like ? What he might have looked like, and what he was, and is, like in his character. Maybe, like me, your picture has built up over the years, from actual pictures of Jesus , such as him welcoming the children , or as the Good Shepherd, striding over the hillside with a lamb across his shoulders. Bible stories must have added to my picture , showing someone wise, tender hearted, brave and true. Maybe I sensed too that he was authentic , that what he said and what he did matched. What's more, he understood and loved me , as well as everyone else. And, of course, Good Friday and Easter deepened the picture.

Just like many people Jesus met in his earthly life, we find ourselves drawn to him and attracted by what we see in him. You could say he wins us, and begins to win our love, as he has with men and women down the ages.

It's quite a shock then to come across Jesus acting right out of character , as he seems to do in today's reading from Matthew ( Chapter 15 v 21 to 28 ) The one who loves and welcomes every person , whoever they are , is saying no to a woman in great need. A foreigner is pleading for help for her suffering daughter and Jesus seems to snub her. She somehow knows he's special and calls him "Son of David" . His response is to say " It's not right to take the children's bread and toss it to the dogs ."

How do we take this harsh , even insulting, remark ? Well, some commentators tell us that the word for dogs can mean puppy dogs, and wouldn't come over as insulting . Others wonder about the manner in which Jesus said it. Was there a touch of humour or teasing perhaps? Jesus must have had a great sense of humour . But we're still stuck with the problem about the Jews , the lost sheep of Israel, having priority . Or was Jesus waiting to see what her response would be? She rises to the challenge with a reply full of spirit , even a bit cheeky ! "Even the dogs eat the crumbs falling under the master's table ." Jesus responds with compassion and healing .

All the same, Jesus's understanding of his mission was Israel- centred , so that they would be able to fulfil their mission, to be a beacon to the world, drawing all nations to understand and to trust in the one God. In the end, he himself would embody the true Israel, in self-giving love , for all humankind.

The Canaanite woman had that precious thing- hope, not the fingers-crossed type of hope, but a heart and mind open towards One who seems , against the odds, to be on her side .

John Hume , the N.Ireland politician , who died recently , kept focussing on the hope that there could be peace, keeping on , in spite of setbacks, huge obstacles and real danger. The Good Friday Agreement owed so much to Hume's persistent hope . We'll know of other people who press on with hope , and we thank God for them.

The woman had hope because of what she saw in Jesus , glimpsing that wonderful truth, which is the ground of our hope and faith: that he is utterly good and to be trusted.

Hope, like love , drives out fear ,as we put our lives into the hands of God.

Part of a prayer by Henri Nouwen :

O Lord, strengthen my hope,  
especially when my many wishes are not fulfilled.  
Let me never forget that you name is Love.  
Amen.