

**Reflection on the Gospel-20th Sunday in Ordinary Time Year A
(Matthew 15:21-28)**

-Veronica Lawson RSM

The gospels are written in Greek and much of the language of the gospels has to be understood against a Greek philosophical background. Today's gospel story culminates in the healing of a "daughter" who may be a little girl or even a young woman. Her mother, the main character in the story, is known to Matthew's community simply as a Canaanite woman, or in other words an indigenous woman. To some early Christian communities, she is Justa, so we might reasonably call her daughter Justina.

Justa comes to Jesus as he moves from Jewish territory into or close to non-Jewish territory. In the language of liturgy, she laments loudly and persistently for her daughter, for Justina is "severely tormented by a demon". For the ancient Greeks, the antithesis of demonic possession or torment is human flourishing or well-being (*eudaimonia*). *Eudaimonia* means having a good guardian spirit as opposed to a malevolent spirit that impairs a person's well-being and sense of self. Justina's well-being is in jeopardy. Her distraught mother is an outsider to the "house of Israel" who is nonetheless familiar with Israel's prayer of lament. She is a woman alone in public space, risking ridicule and rejection to find healing for her daughter.

The immediate response to her plea is silence: Jesus "does not answer her a word". Is he ignoring her cry for help? Is he simply stunned, taken aback at the vehemence of her request? Is he rendered speechless by the simple fact that she would cross the boundaries of gender and ethnicity in this way? Is he in awe at her courage and faith from the outset? All we know is that he says nothing and that the disciples tell him to send her away. He responds by defining the limits of his mission rather narrowly: he was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. Justa is not deterred from her mission. She begs Jesus to help her and receives an explicit refusal in a confronting image that names his people as "the children" and hers as "the dogs". She accepts his statement as a challenge and bests him in the exchange: "even the dogs eat the crumbs...."

Jesus' horizons are expanded by the persistence and insight of this woman. Justa's great faith is affirmed and her daughter is healed. Justa is vindicated and Justina restored to a state of well-being or *eudaimonia*. Justina has her counterparts across the globe. The challenge for us is to be Justa in our times for the sake of all in the Earth community, human and other-than-human, whose well-being or *eudaimonia* is impaired by violence or war or lack of access to the means to flourish.