

We have almost reached the time of the Triodion – the Church’s service book which leads us into and through the Great Fast of Lent. Next Sunday we shall begin to use it, and we will mark our approach to Lent by hearing the Gospel of the Tax Collector and the Pharisee at prayer. In the lead up to this moment the Church has several Sunday Gospel readings which are part of our preparation for our preparation for Lent. Most of us know that the time of the Triodion is preceded by the Gospel story of Zacchaeus, but in some years, and especially those like 2021 when Easter falls very late, other Gospels form part of this lead up. Thus in the last few weeks we have heard the Gospels of the healing of the ten men who suffered from leprosy, and of a blind man. Last week we heard the parable of the talents, and finally today we hear the story of the Canaanite woman whose daughter was healed by Christ.

Most of these stories involve a life-changing encounter with the Lord, but today’s includes an added dimension. Where Jesus actively invited himself to the house of Zacchaeus, and healed the blind man and those with leprosy almost as soon as they asked him to, here he seems almost reluctant to heal the woman’s daughter. Despite her pleas he says nothing to her, and when his disciples ask him to stop the woman being a nuisance he more or less refuses to help, speaking of her as if she were the family pet, rather than a family member. But she refuses to be rebuffed, wittily pointing out that even the pets share the life of the family, and with this Jesus’ reserve is overcome, and he heals her daughter.

It’s a strange story to us, but it echoes several other passages in the Bible. Most famously there is the story in Genesis of Abraham bargaining with God over the fate of the inhabitants of Sodom. “Surely,” he asks, “the judge of the whole world will be fair here? Because you are good,” he says to God, “you will surely not destroy the righteous alongside the unrighteous.” And when God concedes the point Abraham begins to haggle with him over how many righteous people will be sufficient to halt the proposed destruction, eventually beating him down to just ten. Moses speaks to God as if he has to remind him to keep his promises; Job looks to bring God to court to ask him to justify his behaviour. Some of the Psalms, and some of the prophets complain about God’s apparent unfairness.

Through each of these stories runs a simple theme: human beings know enough about right and wrong to be able to criticise God when he seems to be behaving unfairly. As one writer put it, they are able “to teach God how to be God.” Of course, in real terms God does not need our input on this question. But it is worth reminding ourselves that somewhere down deep we have preserved our moral compass, even in our fallen state. We have lost our way, we have missed the target, but we still know in our hearts which way we should be going, and which way we should be aiming. It is a message which is particularly appropriate as we approach the season of Great Lent, for the purpose of the fast is that we should recognise our need to turn around (“repent”) and head in the right direction. The Scripture readings, the Lenten services and prayers, and the practicalities of fasting are all designed, not as a hindrance to our enjoyment of life, but as a help on our journey of return to the kingdom of Christ. As we prepare for Lent itself let us ask God to help us clear away all that hinders us from hearing his voice and his call which lies at the heart of our being. May the Fast bring joy to us all! Amen.