

Over the past week I have been reading a novel about a group of young people with special powers – the only problem is that the adults around them are unsure whether they have enough maturity to use these powers for good. They are full of energy and impulsive, and respond quickly to dangerous situations without thinking through the consequences. This is both their gift and their weakness in a sense – and through a series of bizarre and complex situations, this story plays out.

This is often the question in coming of age novels – the question of who has power and wisdom, and who can use it.

Power, and the perception of the use of power, is one of the very issues which Jesus was trying to confront as he teaches about how the kingdom of God should be.

Having said this, the encounter we hear recorded from Matthew's Gospel today is unsettling to say the least. And at first read seems to be a time when Jesus seems to misuse his power, but is he - or is something else at play here?

Jesus has entered into Tyre and Sidon where the Canaanite woman instantly greets him. It is remarkable enough that word about Jesus had spread to this region that this woman would somehow know who Jesus is

The woman greets Jesus as the "Son of David." Her recognition is all the more remarkable because the disciples have been a bit slow in recognizing Jesus. Yet, this woman hails Jesus, begs his mercy, and asks his power over a demon that has "severely" possessed her daughter (v. 22). How is it possible that this woman has more insight into Jesus' identity than his disciples?

Jesus' response is, perhaps, the most perplexing piece of this narrative. At first, he does not say a word to her, but he refuses to send her away. Only after her persistence does he converse with her. The disciples kept telling him to send her away because they are tired of hearing her cries for help (15:23).

Perhaps, Jesus' refusal to listen to the disciples gave the woman hope that her request would be heard. She does something that is significant in this Gospel: she kneels before him. The author of Matthew uses this action as one befitting a king. Kneeling is not only a sign of kingship, but also recognition of power. There is a connection between those who kneel before Jesus and the healings that Jesus performs. A leper kneels before Jesus and asks to be made clean (Matt 8:2). A ruler kneels and asks for his daughter's healing (9:18). This woman kneels before one whom she recognizes as having authority not only to sit on the throne of David, but to wield power over evil.

Despite Jesus first response which is to dismiss her, she is not deterred. She claims a place in the household, but it is not a position of power. She accepts the status of a family's dog by claiming that even the dog enjoys crumbs from the table.

Her statement is striking. She places hope in what others have discarded. This Jesus has so much power that there is enough power even for those with none. She is not trying to thwart his mission she just wants to be part of it. We are given an image of power which transcends the whole kingdom of God.

Jesus praises her faith. This woman seems to understand what the disciples have yet to grasp. Jesus has come to change the balance of power, change our perceptions, and reshape our hopes – Jesus has come that all might have power which is used appropriately.

The Canaanite woman, despite all that she had been through had faith, believed that her prayers would be answered, stood against the crowd and demanded help. She also named the power, named when it was used well, and named the difference that shared power can have.

This is the power of doing and being right! The ability to name power, acknowledge how it is used, and sharing it as it is needed.

This is a message for our time too – that we need to use our power well. Use it to build us and heal; not tear down and destroy.

What we learn from this passage is that God's message is consistent throughout all time – change can only take place when humanity allows itself to embrace God. To be open to a new way of using power that allows us to face head on the difficult questions of 'what is right and good' – but to do this we need to allow God to be the source of the power which sustains us.

So let us be like the Canaanite woman, who had the courage to kneel in prayer, consistently each day, longing and believing that it can be different. Amen.