

FR ALAN'S REFLECTION

PERSISTENCE

I have mentioned this involvement in a previous homily given last year but would like to raise it again in a different context.

In my previous parish at St Vincent's Ashfield, NSW I, along with 20 parishioners from that parish, were involved with a group known as the Sydney Alliance. The Sydney Alliance is a diverse coalition of community organisations, religious organisations, unions and schools that uses the tools of community organising to make the city a better place to live. During my five year involvement with them I was struck by the persistence of so many to make change happen as they were concerned for the welfare of others. This motivated their determination and they refused to take no for answer. They believed that if they persevered for long enough a change for the better would be effected. I found that it took me beyond the familiar territory of the Church. Out of all the people I encountered through this organisation I don't know how many were part of a Church or even if they believed in God. Regardless, they taught me what it means to have faith and what the mission of the Church is meant to be about.

In the Gospel for this Sunday Jesus moved beyond the area that was familiar to him and entered foreign territory. He encountered a Canaanite woman (a non-Jewish woman) who started calling out to him. Firstly, the Gospel tells us that Jesus ignored her. Secondly, he told her that he was only sent to the lost sheep of the House of Israel. Thirdly he told her it was not right to take the food from the children and throw it to the dogs. It seemed that she was not getting anywhere. Yet she persisted. She believed that Jesus had the power to make a difference and that a change for the better would happen. The fact that this Canaanite woman was asking not for her own welfare but for the welfare of her daughter motivated her determination. She knew that the God of Israel loved her daughter as well. Therefore, she responded with humility, not indignation. She said, 'for even the dogs eat the scraps that fall from the table of the Master.' Her faith impressed Jesus. He loved how she refused to take no for an answer. He responded by saying 'Woman, you have great faith.'

Most scripture scholars would say that Jesus' initial responses to this Canaanite woman prior to helping her was done for the purpose of testing her faith. I believe that this is true. I also believe that this meeting with the Canaanite woman, who displayed a depth of faith Jesus rarely encountered in his own familiar territory, expanded his vision of what his mission was meant to be about.

From this we learn that the God of Israel loves us all, regardless of our level of faith or whether we have a faith at all. God wants us all to persistently pursue the good of those who need help, of those who are hurting and to keep persevering even when it looks like our cause is being ignored. When we feel like giving up, we only need to look at the example of this Canaanite woman, who came from outside the faith family of her time, and like her simply say, 'Lord, help me.'