

What does it mean to have faith?

Our passage today looks at Jesus's encounter with the Canaanite woman and it is all about faith.

The people from Cana were Gentiles with a pagan background and directly descended from Israel's enemies so were disliked and looked down on by the Jews.

This would be one of the reasons the disciples tried to urge Jesus to turn her away and not talk to her and not waste his precious time on her.

Another reason would also be that in Jewish society of the time, women were not permitted to speak directly to a man and certainly not to a rabbi.

The woman, who is sadly not even given a name by Matthew, demonstrates humility and persistence in her faith – she believes that Jesus has the ability to heal her daughter. This mother would not give up – I imagine any parent in her situation would have done the same.

She believed in his power – addressing him initially as 'Lord, Son of David' – whilst many Jews did not even recognise who Jesus really was – but this gentile woman - an outsider did.

She remained respectful when he appeared to ignore her initial approach and didn't get defensive when he then appeared to insult her and compare her to a dog.

The Jews often referred to gentiles as dogs - meaning street dogs which were considered unclean, living wild and rummaging for food through rubbish. But the term Jesus uses here is – Kynaria – and this means a domestic dog, a pet – he was softening what he was saying to her and in response the Canaanite woman acknowledged that she knew her place in Jewish society – under the table gratefully eating the crumbs dropped by others. He was testing her faith.

She was persistent in her request and continued until she received an answer. She stayed there, put away her pride, knowing that he could intercede for her daughter, regardless of what those around thought of her.

She demonstrates the importance of humility even in times of desperation – she stayed steadfast and consistent in her requests even when faced with obstacles.

At the end of the encounter Jesus acknowledges that her great faith has meant that her request for her daughter has been granted. There are only a couple of times when Jesus is recorded as acknowledging the faith of those interceding for others leading directly to their healing and without him actually meeting the patient - this Canaanite woman being one and the Roman Centurian who asks Jesus to heal his servant another – interestingly both were non Jews and both recognised Jesus as being the Messiah and had faith in his healing power. More commonly Jesus accused those around him of being of little faith - those who should really have known better – even at times - his own disciples.

Faith is complete trust and confidence in God – as it says in Hebrews 11 v 1 “Faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see”.

It's trusting in God's promises even when situations are unclear or challenging.

Faith is not passive – it's demonstrated through actions, service and obedience.

It can be shown through our attitudes and our consistent trust in God. This can be through serving others, through acts of kindness, volunteering or helping those in need. James 2 v 17 “faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.”

Faith enables us to see beyond immediate circumstances and rely on God’s guidance. It means trusting in what we can’t fully see, trusting that God will guide us.

Faith develops and grows over time as we come into a closer personal relationship with God and trust in his promises.

Another demonstration of faith is persisting through challenges and trusting God even when doors seem closed in our face or answers are not forthcoming. It’s trusting and knowing that God’s timing is not the same as ours – he sees all, he knows all and we need to remember Romans 8 v 28 “we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him”.

Ways that help strengthen our faith can be as simple as keeping a prayer diary – we used to do this in our Monday morning bible study group. Noting down each week our particular prayers and it was so encouraging to look back and see the ways in which God had answered them – on several occasions it was months or years later or in ways that we could not have imagined - but we could clearly see God’s hand working for the good of those who love him.

Seeing answered prayers and hearing testimony about how God has intervened in people’s lives helps build our faith.

We can nurture that faith in many ways – by spending quiet time and reflecting and praying and this can be assisted with a daily devotional booklet – a short bible reading and reflection - like the UCB Word for Today or Daily Bread - or an app such as Lectio 365 or the You Version Holy Bible which guide users through morning, midday, or evening prayers to deepen their relationship with God. Another way is to join a bible study group – we have one that currently meets on a Wednesday evening and do have a word with me or Roz afterwards if you might be interested in joining us.

Our ultimate aim should be to draw nearer and walk more closely with God and keep in mind (as the Message translation of Ephesians 3 v 20 says) “God can do anything, you know—far more than you could ever imagine or guess or request in your wildest dreams!”

Dear Lord

Help us to have faith like this Canaanite woman, when you seem silent or our prayers seem to be unanswered help us to keep our trust in you. Let us be like this woman – humble, persistent and full of faith. Confident in your willingness to respond to those who seek you earnestly.

Amen

Carol Elsasser, 16 August 2026