In today’s Gospel Jesus speaks to the Canaanite woman and appears to be both rude and racist. She asks for mercy, He says that He has come for the children of Israel, not foreigners. That one who is given to feed the children, shouldn’t take the food of the family table and throw it to the dogs.

Did you know Jesus could speak like this?

We know He speaks of hellfire. (Well, in St Matthew’s Gospel He does, when He’s talking to the complacent and self-satisfied religious authorities. In the other Gospels and in the Epistles, hell barely gets a mention, it just doesn’t seem to be important to them.)

But what about Lazarus? (St John Chapter 11)

Remember that line when Jesus goes to the tomb of His friend Lazarus with Martha and Mary and they say, ‘If you had been here, Lord, he wouldn’t have died’. ‘Jesus wept.’ The shortest sentence in the Bible – a favourite pub quiz question. What is less celebrated is that three times in that passage Jesus is said to weep, or be ‘deeply moved in spirit and troubled’, or similar.
This has most often been translated like that. It has since been suggested that this is a poor translation. That the sense of the original is that Jesus is *angry*. Jesus is not sad that His friend has died, He is furious that His friends have not understood about the Resurrection. But we can’t stand Jesus to be angry, so we have taken an angry frustrated sense of a word and translated it as sad and troubled, and so doing kept Jesus inside our little boxes. Phew! We wouldn’t want Jesus to climb out of the nice little tidy box we keep Him in on the periphery of our lives, would we?

He calls the Canaanite woman a house dog today, but surely it is us who treat Jesus as a house dog. A pet, that sometimes we let in the house and enjoy the company of when it suits us, but at any moment, when we prefer, we stick him back outside in the yard. How many of us, when we’re honest with ourselves treat Jesus like that? And all the while, demanding that He is the Jesus that we want Him to be. That lazily suits my prejudices? My politics? My ambitions? My whims and fancies? Whatever they may be. Like an invisible friend summoned to sanction whatever I need, and dismissed at the first sign of trouble.

Our task, as people in life, and especially in Lent, is to be brave enough to meet the real Jesus. To be brave and honest and thoughtful enough to try and live in a real relationship with the real Jesus. How can we do that?

Silent prayer time – squander time on Jesus and as you sit or kneel to meditate, ask Jesus to make Himself known to you. Do that for a few years and maybe you will begin to see some reality.
Regular Holy Communion, of course: Jesus’ life inside us, His Body becoming one with ours more and more as the years go by.

Living Holy Week each year properly. Coming to the Eucharist in those early days of Holy Week and certainly, every single year, not missing out on that absolutely central journey of Palm Sunday, Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, Easter Sunday. Living that story every year is the heart of the Christian life. You cannot call yourself an Olympian if you never went to the Games. You can barely be called a Christian if you do not live Holy Week. I’m sorry if I sound strict, but it’s true.

And reading the Gospels of course. Read a little section of the Gospels every day, or at least regularly in the week. Hear Jesus’s story again and again, and let it dwell in your mind and heart. Every little helps when it comes to reading the Gospels.

Because if we let Jesus be Jesus, and if there is some reality about our faith and discipleship, it will change us. Over time, it will (as I have found in my life as a Christian without doubt) be bringing us to life in real and mysterious and maddening and wonderful ways. But we have to let God be God, not a pet, but God.

And that brings us full circle and where I’ll finish.

Look again at this Gospel and you’ll see, I suggest, that Jesus is neither racist nor rude. In many ancient texts, the truth of an encounter isn’t found in a soundbite here or there, like it often is for us. The meaning of an encounter is found in the arc. A narrative arc. Where did it begin and where does it end. This is often the case for ancient texts. And in this text, we see a woman of a different tribe coming forward and begging for mercy. Yes,
Jesus spars with her. And in so doing, reveals her faith, her humility and her love. She worships Him – a word only used for God in the New Testament. So she in her actions reveals Christ’s divinity. Here, an outsider, has seen right to the heart of what’s gong on here when so many others (including the Apostles) have been so slow to perceive. And she leaves, restored, embraced by Jesus and with her daughter healed at that very moment because she has perceived the Kingdom of God in her midst.

What’s the lesson here?

The Canaanite woman let Jesus be Jesus. She perceived and sought and found a real relationship with Jesus, not a Jesus cardboard cut out in her head. And that reality of relationship takes her from despised outsider, pathetic beggar to beloved child on the threshold of the Kingdom. That’s the arc this Gospel is bidding us take too. That is what Lent is all about.

Let Jesus be Jesus, not a pet. And let’s get busy meeting the real Jesus in the days ahead. Time in silent prayer, Eucharist, Gospel reading, living Holy Week properly.