

ORD SUN 20 YEAR A 2008

In the name....

One of the greatest gifts of the Jewish people to the world, other than belief in God the Creator, is that wonderful self deprecating sense of humour that we see, which seems to put black moments into perspective and always seems to have an upside.

Isaac Asimov told a hilarious story about a Rabbi Feldman who was having trouble with his congregation; they couldn't agree on anything. The president of the congregation said, "Rabbi, this can't continue. There has to be a conference, and we have to settle all areas of dispute once and for all." The rabbi agreed.

At the appointed time the rabbi, the president, and ten elders met around a magnificent mahogany table in the conference room of the synagogue. One by one the issues were dealt with and on each issue, it became more and more apparent that the rabbi was a lonely voice in the wilderness. The president of the synagogue said, "Come, Rabbi, enough of this. Let's vote and allow the majority to rule." He passed out slips of paper and each man made his mark. The votes were collected and the president said, "You may examine them, Rabbi. It is eleven to one against you. We have the majority."

Offended, the rabbi rose to his feet and said, "So, now you think because of the vote that you're right and I'm wrong. Well, that's not so. I stand here," and he raised his arms impressively while looking heavenward, "and call upon the Holy One of Israel to give us a sign that I'm right and you're wrong."

No sooner were the words out of his mouth when there was a deafening clap of thunder and a brilliant flash of lightning that

struck the mahogany table and cracked it in two. The room was filled with smoke and fumes, and the president and the elders were hurled to the floor. Surrounded by rubble the rabbi stood erect and untouched, his eyes and smile flashing with triumph.

Slowly, the president lifted himself out of the rubble. His hair was singed, his glasses were hanging from one ear, his clothing was in disarray. Finally he said, "All right, eleven to two. But we still have the majority."

A sense of humour is often one of the things I find missing in many churches. Why can't our church services be happy and enjoyable.

As a child I was brought up in a very severe church...

Everything is always so serious, and what is terrible for me at times is when very funny things happen in the middle of services.

Often we do not credit Jesus with having a sense of humour. He was about 'God stuff', and so cannot possibly have been light-hearted. Where was his Jewish sense of humour?

Well, I think in today's gospel we do see his sense of humour.

In his contact with this wonderful woman, Jesus displays his sense of humour, and the woman, knowing what he was on about, replies equally.

The setting for this story is interesting.

For the first and only time in Jesus' ministry in Matthew's Gospel, does Jesus go outside of Israel.

(Remember that Mat is a Jew, writing for largely Jewish converts)

He goes out, to get away from the Pharisees and Sadducees, who were trying to get him, and from the people who kept making demands. He knew they would not follow into Canaanite territory.

Just when they think it is safe, this woman comes begging. (just what they had been trying to get away from)

The disciples suggests Jesus should give her what she wants. They do not care for her, they just want to get rid of her.

But Jesus has other things on his mind. He was preparing himself for the end. He was regrouping.

But he turns to the woman, and says, probably with a twinkle in his eyes of respect for this woman who loved her daughter so much, "it is not right to give the children's bread to the (puppy or pet) dogs". (kunaria)

But she sensing she has won what she wants, retorts and quickly and sharply, and also with a sense of humour 'Yes but even the dogs can eat the pieces which fall from their masters table.'

This woman is a great woman, and an example to all. She has great faith, she did not just hope Jesus might do something, she knew he could, and she was persistent enough so that she got it.

She also loved greatly. She was willing to empty herself of pride and bow before a Jew, the enemy of her people, in the middle of the street, to get help for her daughter.

How could she fail to get what she so earnestly desired, the life of her daughter.

So how do we stand before Jesus. So often we think we should stand trembling before a distant throne, but that is not the picture presented in our gospel today. Rather we find an open, welcoming person, one who reaches out in love to one who is so vulnerable.

It is important that we have in our minds a right picture of who Jesus is, because it not only governs our relationship with Jesus but also is the image we give to others.

This image should always be open, welcoming, full of love and acceptance, tinged with a sense of humour.

If this is the image the Church is able to present then I think many more people would find Church a place they want to be.