

## Sunday 20<sup>th</sup> August: Jesus and the Canaanite Woman

Isaiah 56.1, 6-8; Romans 11.1-2a, 29-32; Matthew 15.21 -28

This is the full script of the sermon on Matthew 15. 21-28. On the day I delivered it without the notes, and 'acting' aspects of the story out. So, the actual delivery was probably a little different to this. So, I've updated the script where I can.

The events of this week, Charlottesville, Turku, Barcelona and surroundings, demonstrate again the animosity and divisiveness which are part of our world. The lack of inclusiveness and acceptance stands out, as people enact their grievances in deadly ways on other people. The three passages from today also reflect on an ancient difference, that of the Jew and the Gentile.

I've chosen to focus on Matthew's gospel because today's gospel presents us with an unusual, and difficult picture of Jesus. His response to the woman who's come to him seems more akin to a grumpy, possibly sexist or racist character. First of all, he seems to ignore her, and then he uses the word 'dogs' to describe her. And he's not meaning a friendly pet dog, rather it's a derogatory word. It's not exactly what we might expect in the Gospels. Is there any way which we can make sense of this story?

So, I'd like to look at the story more closely. Jesus *withdrew* to the region of Tyre and Sidon, that's the word in the Greek. He's getting away from conflict with the Pharisees and others in Galilee, and he meets this woman. It's interesting that Matthew uses an anachronistic word, he describes her as a Canaanite woman, who were Israel's traditional enemies. In a parallel version of this story in Mark, he uses the correct geographical-political phrase Syro-phoenician. So, Matthew is upping the ante a bit. She's a Gentile and an enemy. What's more she's a woman. And women can defile men, a proper religious teacher wouldn't have anything to do with her. He's potentially defiled by her presence, and especially by talking to her.

And she starts 'shouting', she's making a public nuisance of herself. Just imagine it, you have this religious group wondering along, minding their own business, maybe relieved to be away from the pressure of Galilee, and suddenly she rushes up to them, and cries out loud at them. Embarrassing, yes, but ritually this is a disaster. She's not ritually clean, and she's not treating Jesus or the disciples with proper respect.

What does she cry out? Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David, my daughter is tormented by a demon. It's interesting, she's asking Jesus to have mercy on *her*, she's in pain, she's in torment because of what's happening to her daughter, who may or may not have been there. But she's not directly asking him to heal her daughter.

Also, she uses 'Lord' and 'Son of David'. Now, Son of David is a Jewish phrase, a relatively rare Jewish Messianic title, which in Matthew is used at key moments. Here this Jewish phrase is on the lips of a Gentile woman. Something unusual is going on. She's attributing something to this

travelling Jewish rabbi-preacher which is quite profound. It's possible she has already heard of Jesus, otherwise, why is she running up to this stranger on the road? And maybe she's got an insight which others haven't?

But what happens? Jesus ignores her. In the version we had read it says: "Jesus did not answer her at all."

In the Greek there's a repeated phrase, used three times, to break up this next interaction into three parts. and this is the first of them, it says: "But he did not answer her a word."

Then the disciples come to him and complain about her that she's going on and on, and this time Jesus replies: "But he having answered said", and gives a reply to the disciples' complaint by saying that he wasn't sent except to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.

Then the woman steps in, the Greek uses the word for worshipping, which in our version is translated as kneeling. And she simply says: Lord help me. Again, it's asking something for her. A simple plea, and done as an act of worship. This Gentile woman who has said he's the Son of David is now worshipping him.

The third repetition comes next: "But he having answered said". We've had three phrases about Jesus, each with a 'but he', and using the word 'answered'. This time though he's talking to the woman. Matthew as he presents this story to us is emphasising the interaction using repetition.

Jesus says: "It's not fair to take the children's food (the Greek word is 'bread'), and throw it to the dogs." Now, the word 'dog' is a huge insult. It has connotations of religious corruption. Dogs weren't pets then, rather they were huge guard dogs, ones that only the owners might safely approach. However, Jesus actually uses the word for 'little dogs', it's still not very nice, it has a sense of 'curs', but these little dogs are clearly safe enough to run around the dining table. Of course, what we don't see in the text is the body language, the facial expressions, is Jesus being playful with her? Encouraging her to move to a point further than she might have expected she could go with this religious teacher?

Her reply comes back sharply, "Yes, Lord, yet even the (little) dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table". It's ingenious, witty, insightful. This is theology in action. She doesn't take the word little dogs as a humiliation, but instead responds from a position of powerlessness to make her continued request. She who might have seemed the outcast, the one who's the lowest in status in this story, she's the one who sees something new. There's a fresh way of moving forward with this.

And now Jesus's response is vocal and vociferous, the Greek changes from the earlier 'but he' to 'Then having answered...' there's an emphatic, definite quality to his response. "Woman, great is your faith!" Out of the heart she has answered, and instead of what the disciples, and maybe many of Matthew's first readers, might have expected that she would have shown that

she was defiled, corrupt, a dog, because of her gender and her ethnicity, instead she shows the exact opposite.

Jesus commends her faith. It's 'great'. And then he says, "Let it be done as you wish." He doesn't actually say any words of healing. She had asked for her pain to go away, for Jesus to have mercy on her. And the result is that her daughter is healed immediately.

What do we have?

There's a possible parallel is with the story of Elijah, who in the region of Sidon deals with a Gentile woman who has a sick child. I Kings 17: 8-24 is the passage. And bread also comes into that story too, where she is running out of meal to make bread. Elijah tests the woman first, asking her to make him some cakes for him from the little she has left at a time of famine. Certainly, the disciples would have known the story, and Matthew writing it would have been aware of it. Was Matthew setting this story about Jesus against the Elijah story? Is Jesus presented as testing the woman in some way?

Also, in the opening of chapter fifteen, Pharisees and scribes from Jerusalem came to challenge Jesus, asking him why his disciples don't wash their hands in a ritual, proscribed way, before they eat – breaking the tradition of the Elders, the oral law of Pharisaic teaching. Jesus offered them a question back, about how Pharisaic teaching allows people to wriggle out of honouring their father and mother. He took them to task about their insistence that what goes into someone might defile the person, but Jesus said that it was what came out of a person, through their mouth, that's what defiles someone.

Now, the disciples really didn't seem to get this, and they asked him to explain what on earth he was talking about. Just before the passage with the woman, Jesus said: "For out of the heart come evil intentions... (and he listed a number of things)... these are what defile a person, but to eat with unwashed hands does not defile." It's not the outward but the inward, that's what defiles someone he's telling them.

So, the disciples were confused. Maybe they are still unsure about what Jesus is going on about what comes out of a person defiling them. And then they meet this woman, who's clearly going to defile them. And they just want to get rid of this woman. She's a nuisance and potentially defiling.

Jesus is operating on a double level. He's talking both to the disciples, demonstrating to them that what comes out of a person is what should be weighed, and he's talking to the woman, allowing her to demonstrate her faith, to bring out from her the depth of that faith. It reminds me of that parable about someone imploring during the night, and being answered as a result (Lk. 18: 1-8). It reminds me of how in other instances Jesus accepts the acts of a woman who breaks perfume over him to anoint him. Also there are echoes of the behaviour of other prophets in the Hebrew scriptures, Ezekiel enacted many of his prophecies, 'showing not

telling.' I wonder if Jesus was doing something similar. As a result, this woman's faith shows that she is not defiled, that she is accepted, and Jesus is redefining purity and defilement.

If we look at the world around us we have many people, including Christians, who still look on the outside of someone, on their gender, their sexual orientation, their race, and so many other things, so many other things, and see that person as defiled as a result. It's happening in the US, it's happening here. We need to find ways to speak this truth that 'even the little dogs deserve the crumbs that fall from the Master's table'. To stand up and say that people deserve more, that in a rich world we need to find ways to get those crumbs out to others, and more than crumbs too.

Maybe there's also a message to us to pay close attention to how we see others. It's so easy to sum someone up from the outside, and not to see the person within. One of the psychotherapy writers I like speaks of looking into someone's eyes, or paying attention to them so deeply, that you see the person within. You really see them. I wonder if Jesus was doing something like that with this woman, seeing that she was a person of deep faith, and that on the lines of a teacher of wisdom he was giving her the space to articulate something that maybe she hadn't realised she knew, and to demonstrate what faith can be.

Jesus overturned traditional views, overturned religious blindness, and instead allowed us to see a woman of great faith in action. This isn't really a healing story of her daughter, it's a story of unexpected faith, expressed in a straightforward way. She's not being pious, scholarly, clever. She comes to Jesus and asks for what she needs, which concerns her daughter, yes, but is actually for her own transformation.

And, she was transformed, her faith was transformed, maybe how she saw herself was transformed.

Also, maybe this is a model of how to approach God? We feel unworthy, we feel that God doesn't hear us, doesn't really pay attention to us. Maybe this is encouraging us to sit with God, to acknowledge our own sense of not feeling worth much, of not being up to some standard we might believe we should hold to. Instead perhaps all we need to do is stay with that sense of unworthiness, or whatever it is, just as this woman does, and to speak to God through it, around it, with it. Even the little dogs eat the crumbs that fall from the table. Maybe we deserve some crumbs, whoever we are?