

The Woman from Canaan

Sermon by the Rev Derek Lightbourne, St James Lower Hutt, August 20th 2017

Keynote Bible passage Matthew – 15: 21-28

What we have just heard from Matthew's Gospel is a remarkable story. Remarkable because it is included in the most Jewish of the gospels. Remarkable because of the love and courage it conveys, and the patient and persistence it demonstrates. What are we to make of this quite remarkable passage? Particularly, what are we to make of Jesus' seemingly unkind behaviour? Biblical scholars have tried to explain it by a number of sympathetic excuses for Jesus. But this morning, let's come at it from the other side of things. Let's look at it from the perspective of this Canaanite woman.

I invite us all to enter into the woman's story, to look at this passage through *her experience*. Let her be the one who speaks to us through Scripture.

1) *The context* is that things are not going well for Jesus. From preceding chapters of this gospel, we know he has been jostled by crowds, pressured for healings, and irritated by his disciples' inability to understand. The situation with civil and religious authorities is tense and the conflict is heating up. Both Jesus and the disciples are short tempered, cross with each other. One of his closest throughout the ministry and relative John the Baptist has been killed. Key words at the beginning of this episode: Jesus left that place and *went away*...And so they move north for a break, a rest and some peace and quiet. Or so they thought.

Then the woman appears, a Canaanite Gentile. Matthew makes it clear that she is from a different kind of people than they, **racially and linguistically inferior**. In the culture of the region Gentile was bad enough, but to be a Canaanite was worse!

The woman disturbs the peace – shouting at Jesus as she seeks help for her daughter: 'Have mercy on me Lord, Son of David.... It is clear she has prepared very well for this meeting. She knows who he is using his Messianic title in addressing him. She calls him 'Lord, Son of David'. Jesus is silent 'he did not answer at all.' It was as though she was intruding into his privacy. Furthermore his disciples are not happy - they appeal to Jesus to send her away. And Jesus, somewhat surprisingly does not seem to want to help, saying he came to minister only to the Jews, 'the lost sheep of the house of Israel.'. This woman, however, did not let the barriers of different culture and religion keep her distant. Note then how the woman comes even closer to him, kneels in humility and appeals 'Lord help me'. She had received a rebuff and yet came even closer to him, and invited him to take notice of her. It was coming into his personal presence.

Then Jesus makes another seemingly hostile response in referring to 'dogs'. We need to pause a moment and look at this use of the term, 'dogs'. The imagery here may be pointing to a family meal where children eating dinner or breakfast, occasionally sneaking crust of bread to playful puppies underfoot. But something quite different was intended here.

In those days such was the dislike, even hate - Gentiles were indecently called 'dogs' by Jews. When applied to a person it always meant contempt. It referred to someone who was either unworthy or not appreciated. Remember in the Sermon on

the Mount: “Do not give dogs what is holy or cast your pearls before swine?” This remarkable story is inviting us to ‘get inside’ that Gentile woman’s circumstance.

It may be you can think of a moment or time when you have been left out or shut out. Not at all a pleasant experience. Being ‘shut out’ is one we all should recognise. I remember this from my youth, being smaller and thinner than other classmates I wasn’t needed for the games- and in rugby was a winger – mostly far from the action. I determined later that where I have opportunity it is to *include people* where possible, especially in church community.

Back to the story, this woman comes back again for her third intervention --- and a strange one it was. She challenges Jesus about dogs eating the crumbs: Jesus says “It is not right to take the children’s bread and toss it to their dogs.” “Yes Lord” the woman said. ‘But even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table’.

Then Jesus answered, ‘Woman, you have great faith! Your request is granted.’ And her daughter was healed from that very hour. Here was patient and gentle persistence. And Jesus changes his mind! Immediately. It is the only story recorded in which Jesus reverses himself as a result of an appeal from someone else. The only time in the Gospels when someone talked back to him and Jesus accepted the rebuke. And that woman? She was really quite remarkable. Suffering the racist and sexist restrictions which her society placed on her, she apparently did not accept their low esteem. Since she had nothing to lose anyhow, she could gather up her courage and challenge the authority on behalf of another...for the sake of her daughter. The woman broke custom, went after what she needed, stood up to this visiting teacher and healer, and got the better of him in an argument. Finally, she got what she most desired: her daughter was healed.

2) Why then may we take from this story as being in Matthew’s Gospel?. First we need to recognise the *mission of Jesus is across racial and cultural barriers*. That is even further emphasised by the great commission of Jesus to ‘make disciples of all nations’ also in Matthew’s gospel. The early church was at pains to emphasise this – for example St Paul’s ‘in Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female – we are all one in Christ.’

News of what has been occurring in the United States in the last week has reverberated throughout the world. Racism, clearly is not acceptable, end of story. When visiting there a few years back I sat and listened to stories of segregation, from a young ‘black’ woman studying at university. It was just like the story today – favouritism towards whites was her experience, being left out, ignored. It is as though racial discrimination lies just below the surface, and it took Charlottesville to reveal it. But then we must be careful not to be too judgmental. We are well aware in our own history of times when this has been evident. I continue to be embarrassed by stories of Maori in the Land Wars seeking peace and reconciliation and being ignored. Our church has been seeking to do this through Te Pouhere, interweaving strands of our different cultures. And its more than bi-cultural – it is *multi-cultural*.

2) Secondly we need to remember this is a story about a healing, of a young girl. Yet actually there is more healing content than Jesus responding to the woman’s and the child’s need. What I also take from this story is the aspect earlier mentioned about the woman **coming into Jesus’ presence**. In her distress she came closer to him for the help she had faith he could give. That’s surely guidance for us. A reminder when in times of need to come into Jesus’ presence. To be aware of his concern for us.

Sometimes like the woman that help may not be immediately evident. Rather to keep being aware, and I find it helpful when words seem to run out, to give thanks praising God. That is thankfulness, not for the situation but that God is *in the situation*. Thus was Paul's guidance to the Philippians : 'In all your prayers ask God for what you need, always asking him with a thankful heart. And God's peace, which is far beyond human understanding will keep your hearts and minds safe in union with Christ Jesus.' (4.6 -7). Thus an outcome for us is to have that *peace* that the situation is in Jesus' hands, in his concern, and he has time for us and the situation of need. That's where my faith and trust lies.

In summary then, two themes run through the story both of which highlight the theme of today 'Good news for all' and the Sentence: 'The Lord is near to all who call on him' – an assurance from Psalm 145. It is for us as the woman to come to Jesus, to trust and believe. So may Jesus also say to us: 'Great is your faith! What you want will be done for you'.