

Our Gospel passage stands out as being one of the most problematic sections of all the gospels. Whatever picture you have of Jesus – you probably struggled to reconcile that picture with the Jesus confronting this Canaanite woman in her moment of distress. But we cannot just pass over it - both Matthew and Mark thought there was something important going on here as both of them included it in their gospels in spite of having more than enough material from Jesus' life. They were both interested in portraying him positively – so they must have thought that this account holds important information.

To help us unpack this account there is an important question to answer: “When did Jesus fully understand who he was and what he was going to do?”

The answer to this question affects profoundly what we think is going on in this confrontation: Even if you take the view that, as fully God Jesus would have been all knowing (because God is all knowing!), there had to come a point when he reached that point of knowledge - for instance, he couldn't have known everything when he was a baby in his manger – there had to become a point when he came into his understanding. I want to suggest to you that being fully human meant that Jesus could not be all knowing and, like us was learning and refining his knowledge as he went through life. Those who watched the first Superman movie will remember that as he entered into adulthood Superman went off to an ice cave where he learned all about the planet he came from and who he was then. Often we tend to treat the time that Jesus spent in the wilderness at the beginning of his ministry like that – as if he went in with limited knowledge and came back fully understanding everything. It makes more sense to me to think that he had a sense of who he was from an early age but - through a combination of prayer, attendance at the synagogue/temple and reading of Scripture - his understanding of who he was and the nature of his mission developed. If I am right (and not everyone would agree with me) then it is more than possible that his understanding of the Good News of God was still developing through his ministry. In this encounter with the Canaanite woman the crisis between what he had learned as a Jewish boy and man of the priority of the Jewish nation and the compassion of God for all humanity comes to a head. As fully man he had received and absorbed all the assumptions about the special privilege of being a Jewish Man. As fully God he operated with his Father's heart of compassion and, over time this allowed him to reinterpret what he had been told and rediscover the true purposes of his Heavenly Father recorded in the scriptures. I think Matthew includes this passage because it marks a key watershed where Jesus recognises that the love of God at work in him reaches, not just to the “lost sheep of Israel” but to all who cry out to God.

In the same account in Mark's Gospel the woman is described as Syrio Phoenician (i.e. where she had come from). In describing her as a Canaanite, Matthew locates her firmly in Jewish history as one of their key enemies. When she cries out to him as Lord, Son of David she was giving him his Messianic title but she was also remembering their history where David repeatedly defeated the Canaanites. But she was also a Mother, and like so

many mothers, was determined to do whatever was necessary – at whatever cost to herself – to get her daughter healed. Jesus didn't answer at first, but the disciples were clear in their response: "Send this nuisance foreign woman away – she is spoiling our rest,"

Rather than being deterred by Jesus saying he was only sent to the lost sheep of Israel the woman became more insistent:

Jesus replied 26He replied, "It is not right to take the children's bread and toss it to their dogs."

Now if you were hearing this story for the first time today I would expect a shocked intake of breath. Could Jesus really be dismissing this woman who had come to him for help as a dog?

The answer is, yes he seems to have been doing – but we are not quite sure what he meant! – It was not uncommon for Jews to refer to Gentiles as dogs – by which they meant the wild scavenging dogs that roamed the rubbish tips. But the word for dogs used here refers to small household pets.

What we do know from the passage is that the woman didn't take it as offensive and off-putting, so we need to be wary of interpreting it according to our own sensibilities. What she did is respond with: - 27"Yes, Lord," she said, "but even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table." In other words – the dogs can eat as well without depriving the children – she can receive healing for her daughter without reducing the effectiveness of Jesus' ministry to the Jews.

By now the compassion of God at work in Jesus, and his recognition that she had faith that he hadn't seen in the Jewish leaders, caused him to acknowledge her faith and heal her daughter.

For me the key to this passage is that the Holy Spirit working in Jesus enabled him to see that God's generous love, and therefore his ministry, reached so much wider than his culture had taught him. God's generous love reaches out to all that call on him – not just the Jews.

By listening to the cries of the needy, Jesus was able to see where his culture and background had blinded him to the magnitude of what God is doing in the world -reaching out to all equally.

The Holy Spirit is continuing that process in us – challenging the times when our background and who we are obscures the needs of others.

I am conscious that I as a white, British, middle class, straight, married male each one of these adjectives gives me more advantage than those who don't share the same labels.

From this position of advantage it is so easy to fail to hear the struggles of those who are treated unfairly by life.

Just a few weeks after our newspapers were full of stories of “Black Lives Matter” now they are dominated by the fight to keep refugees and asylum seekers out of the country – by stopping the boats crossing from France. The paradox was highlighted by a facebook post which simply said: “Is it true that All Lives Matter? Just asking for a kid in a boat!” Clearly the government and newspapers are treating refugees and asylum seekers as problems to be solved, not people with needs, let alone young men who have much to contribute. We have been fortunate to have an asylum seeker as part of our church family (who I am not going to name in my on-line sermon.) Not only has he become a much loved and important member of the church family in his own right – but he has helped us see that the people on those boats are not just problems to be dealt with – or statistics in a newspaper but people loved by God - they may be born in a different country – they may have a different language and different colour skin – but they are no less entitled to opportunity in life than you and me. The same God who generously pours out his love to us – calls us to generously pour our love out to all who call.

It seems that when Jesus encountered need or injustice, the Holy Spirit in him expanded his vision to enable him to touch lepers, value those who were rejected, confront injustice and reach out across racial and economic boundaries. God is still doing the same in us – helping us to confront our own prejudices and lack of awareness by experiencing his compassion for those we might not even have been aware of.