

Bishop Jonathan's Sermon – 16th August 2020 – Trinity 10

Matthew 15: 21-28

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

I want to talk today about what has to be one of the strangest passages in the New Testament: Jesus' encounter with the Canaanite woman in Matthew 15. I don't know how it sounded to you, but on first hearing it strikes me as really odd – and in fact almost offensive. Jesus seems to behave towards this woman in a completely uncharacteristic fashion – to the point of being rude or even cruel – as well as quite possibly racially prejudiced. So what on earth are we to make of this strange episode? Just what is going on here? And what if anything does it have to say to us?

Let's start by taking a closer look at the passage. Jesus and his disciples have gone north out of Galilee, and up to the coast around Tyre and Sidon. They are in foreign parts – so think Whitley Bay or Newcastle perhaps, rather than Bridlington or Scarborough. We aren't told why they have gone there, but maybe Jesus wanted a bit of a break before he returned to Galilee.

While they are having a quiet walk along the beach, or whatever, minding their own business, this local Canaanite woman (meaning she was not a member of the Jewish people) accosts them and cries out to Jesus, asking him to heal her daughter of demon-possession. Normally you would expect Jesus to respond to her in some way – but instead he doesn't say a word. He just keeps on walking.

Now after a while, the disciples are getting a bit fed up about this, because the woman is still there mithering them. So they say to Jesus, "Can't you just tell her to get lost and give us some peace?" Then Jesus says these strange words, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel." At which point the woman comes and falls on her knees right in front of Jesus, so that he simply cannot ignore her anymore – and she implores him, in complete exasperation, "Lord, help me!"

Things now get even more bizarre, as Jesus replies, "It is not right to take the children's bread and toss it to their dogs." Effectively, Jesus is calling the woman a dog – and in Middle Eastern culture that was very much an insult – and that because of her race, as remember she is a Canaanite and not an Israelite.

Most people would have given up at that point and gone away in despair and anger, but not this woman. She is feisty and she is fighting for her daughter's life, so she comes back again to Jesus, "Yes, Lord, but even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table."

Finally, Jesus gives in and responds in the kind of way we would have expected in the first place – and he gives the woman what she wants: "Woman, you have great faith! Your request is granted."

So, to come back to our original questions, what on earth is going on and what are we to make of this?

Well, I think there are three main possibilities, each of which is part of what is happening here.

The first is that *Jesus is pushing the woman to see if her faith is real*. Does she really believe that he is the Messiah and that he has the power to do as she asks? This is, I think, one aspect of what is going on here, and it is something that we see to some extent in other parts of the gospels. Faith matters when it comes to receiving the blessings of God, and in a number of his parables Jesus teaches that people need to persist in asking God for what they need, like the woman banging on the door of the unjust judge. Looking in from the outside, it seems harsh, but the woman persists and her faith is rewarded.

The second possibility is that *Jesus is expanding the disciples' understanding of the purposes of God*. Remember that they were all Jews, and that as far as they were concerned the Messiah, when he came, would be the saviour of the Jewish people and the restorer of the nation of Israel. Here, they were on a few days break in a foreign country and this woman was a Canaanite – she was not a Jew, not a member of the people of God – so why should Jesus have anything to do with her? We need to understand that this was part of their mind-set – and what happens here profoundly challenges their understanding of God's purposes of redemption. What happens here shows that God's salvation – the healing and liberation that he brings – is NOT only for the people of Israel. This was only a small first step, but it was a vitally important one – which is confirmed by the words of Jesus' Great Commission to his disciples in Matthew 28:19, when he says to them, "Go and make disciples of *all nations*." And of course we see that same dynamic of inclusion being carried on in the Acts of the Apostles on the Day of Pentecost and as the gospel is taken to the Gentiles and not only to the Jews.

The third possibility is along the same lines, but even more radical – namely that in and through this episode, *Jesus' own understanding of God's purposes is being expanded*. Now this may be hard for us to get our heads' round, but what if Jesus himself is on a journey of discovery, as he grows as a human being and as his ministry unfolds? You could say that such an understanding takes seriously the humanity of Jesus – that from his childhood onwards he was learning more and more about the purposes of God, and that he was being formed by his experiences. Otherwise, events like the temptation in the wilderness are just for show, whereas in reality they are part of shaping who Jesus is and how he understands his role as the Messiah. Perhaps in this incident, Jesus himself is discovering more about the purposes of God.

So, what does all this mean for us?

Well, as with this woman, sometimes God does push us to go on asking and not to give up. We ourselves may face times when our faith is tested – when it is stretched almost to breaking point – and when we persevere at times like that then our faith grows. Maybe right now in the midst of the Coronavirus crisis is a time like that for some or many of us. We are being called to persevere in seeking God, in asking for what we need, and that persevering can in the end strengthen our faith as it reminds us of our utter dependency on God. Is God pushing us so that we learn to persevere and to look to him to give us what we need – rather than relying on our own human resources?

Secondly, have we grasped the full breadth of God's purposes, or are we stuck in the same kind of mind-set as the disciples? Do we still think perhaps unconsciously that Jesus is really just for "our tribe" or for people like us? Think for a moment about the Black Lives Matter movement, which was so prominent a few weeks ago but has already slipped from the headlines. Have we really understood that God's purposes are for *all people*, and not just for some? And if we have, then what are we doing about that? Because that belief needs to be turned into action if it is not just to be empty words.

And if we find that hard, then remember that from what we see here even Jesus was on a journey of discovery. He too was learning more about God's purposes – and the crucial thing was that he was ready to listen and to learn, to change his mind and to expand his horizons. That will be a big challenge for us and for our churches as we gradually emerge from the Coronavirus crisis. The world has changed *and God is calling us to change* – to open our eyes, to broaden our horizons and to find new ways of reaching out to new people, people outside our tribe, people not like us – in fact to all people and all nations just as Jesus commanded us.

The question is this: *how will we do that*, as individuals and as churches in the months and years ahead? Amen.