

Great Faith

Matthew 15: 21-28

Picture the scene. Jesus and his disciples are away in the remote, largely Gentile region of Tyre and Sidon beside the sea. We can't be sure whether he was visiting friends or escaping from the hustle and hassle of increasing sniping from the Pharisees, or Herod's secret police, but he "withdrew" there. Was he expecting a kind of cloak of anonymity, if not invisibility, to sweep over him?

That didn't happen.

"Lord, Son of David, have mercy on me!" a woman cries insistently.

Mithering. Bothering. Fussing. Hovering. Getting in the way.

That *woman*!

Jesus responds with stony silence.

Then his entourage try to move her along. She's pestering them as well.

This is an unexpected piece of baggage in the middle of their plan for some leisure, some time away.

They are being pursued by this woman. This would be seen as an outrage. Not only is she a woman, but a Gentile. And furthermore, she's a *Canaanite*, one of the ancient enemies of Israel! A Rabbi didn't speak to women in public anyway; she is breaking a social code. She is just beyond the pale on so many levels.

Oh, that woman!

That woman is a mother. She is desperate for Jesus to heal her daughter, who has been stricken by a terrible illness. Her love for her child drives her determination. She knows that Jesus has the power to make her daughter better.

She's bright, quick-witted, and fearless. She wasn't going to be put off.

She recognises Jesus as Lord. The way that she calls him "Son of David" as well as "Lord" makes it clear that she isn't just using "lord" as another polite word for "sir". She kneels before him to plead her case.

She kneels, and at first it seems as if she is going to be leaving with only a stinging insult ringing in her ears: "It is not right to take the children's bread and toss it to the dogs." Jesus makes a highly unfavourable distinction between the family of Israel, and the dogs: people like her, that Canaanite woman. His words appear to reinforce all the divisive racial, social and cultural stereotypes which existed.

That woman whips back smartly, “Yes, Lord, but even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table.” And at that point her daughter is healed. Jesus commends her great faith.



Nevertheless, that woman’s story leaves us with so many “whys” to ponder. Why was Jesus silent in the face of this brave, fearless, outcast woman who recognised him for who he was? Why does he pause and say, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel?” Why does he call her and the Gentiles “dogs”?

There are many ways to consider these questions, and their complexity encourages us to keep coming back to the gospel and exploring it.

The Canaanite woman certainly makes Jesus pause. She goes from being a source of exasperation to inspiration. Her presence makes him weigh up the fact that whilst his first calling was indeed to “the lost sheep of Israel”, his call was not exclusively to them. She bears with his silence and waits for his next move. She parries the blow which compares her to a scavenging dog by focusing on the fact that *this* dog is a domesticated creature, with its place within a wider household, waiting its turn. As she comments on the dogs eating the crumbs falling on the floor under the family table, her words echo the picture of twelve basketfuls of left-over bread and fish after five thousand men and uncountable numbers of women and children had eaten their fill.

She is also an encouragement to us. Even at times when it appears that our prayers are going unanswered, when we seem to meet a wall of silence in our requests, she is an inspiration to persevere. That silence may not mean “no”, only “wait”, and sometimes it’s harder to accept that we must wait.

Jesus did indeed have mercy on her. She is rewarded abundantly: her daughter is healed, she receives not only mercy but she is raised up and honoured by Jesus, praising her for her faith in front of the male, Jewish onlookers and Gentiles. The impact of her prayers is far greater than she might have anticipated.

Yet there is a sobering challenge for us in this story, too. It is good to identify with that Canaanite woman, but what about the disciples? The woman's "great faith" is in contrast to the disciples' – "You of little faith, why did you doubt?" as Jesus said to Peter. The disciples shooed the woman away. They asked Jesus to help by getting rid of this noisy distraction. Do we do the same thing when something difficult or awkward interrupts us and spoils our nicely-laid plans? Are there people or situations known to us which we'd rather ignore? As the second verse of the hymn ["There's a wideness in God's mercy"](#) puts it: "But we make his love too narrow/by false limits of our own/and we magnify his strictness/with a zeal he would not own."

Let us give thanks for that woman's great faith, and follow her courageous lead as she kneels before her Lord.

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