

The Canaanite Woman

Matthew 15: 10-28

'I was only sent to the lost sheep of Israel... It is not right to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs.' This is Jesus' response to a mother's desperate plea for healing for her daughter. And Jesus refers to her as a *'dog'*. As a woman, I've always found this passage difficult reading, so out of keeping with Jesus' earlier responses to women in need – think of the woman caught in adultery about to be stoned, the Samaritan woman at the well with a shady past, the woman who had been bleeding for 12 years and thus regarded as unclean. Why does Jesus treat *this* woman so differently? His response appears uncompassionate at best, cruel at worst. So what is going on?

To understand this passage, we need to look at what has gone before and the context in which Jesus has the conversation with the woman.

So, Jesus has been moving around the countryside teaching the crowds, healing the sick, driving out demons. People are coming from far and near to hear him, and news of his teaching and miracles will have spread throughout the region. Jesus then returns to his hometown and began teaching in the local synagogue, but his welcome in his own town is not so warm and Jesus tells those who take offence at him, *'Only in his own house is a prophet without honour.'*

John the Baptist is beheaded by Herod and, when Jesus hears of John's death, he tries to retreat by boat to a solitary place but is pursued by the crowds, as we heard a couple of weeks ago. He spends a day healing the sick, and then feeds more than 5000 of them with five loaves of bread and two fish, with much left over.

Then, last week, we heard the story of Jesus walking on water in the middle of a storm and calling Peter to come to him. When Peter becomes afraid and starts to sink, Jesus bemoans his lack of faith, *'You of little faith, why did you doubt?'* More healings follow and then, just before Jesus leaves the Sea of Galilee, he argues with the Pharisees and the teachers of the law about what is clean and unclean. The Pharisees are questioning Jesus' authority, and he in turn is challenging their understanding of the law, and so of God. They're arguing about how scripture should be understood, with each side determined to make its case. Jesus is clear that his mission is in keeping with God's great

missionary enterprise in calling *first and foremost the people of Israel*, but the Pharisees will not accept his teaching when it appears to contradict the ancient laws of purity. When Peter struggles to understand too, Jesus puts it into plain language and says clearly that it's *what comes out of a person's mouth* that is clean or unclean, not what goes into it, thus providing a new understanding of the strict laws about what you could and couldn't eat or touch. But this was radical thinking that would take the disciples a while to get their heads round. It wasn't just the Pharisees who were struggling with it.

After these events, tiring and confrontational as they had been, Jesus takes his disciples to the region of Tyre and Sidon. Now this is Gentile territory, which most Jews avoided. There, he was confronted by a Canaanite woman, who was unclean in Jewish religious terms. The woman starts out by shouting. She is making a scene, being an embarrassment. She must have heard from others that Jesus was in town and knew that he had cast out demons in Galilee, so may have thought, *'This is the man who can do something for my daughter.'* But it's important to notice in what she shouts that she acknowledges that Jesus is Lord. And here is the irony. In his own town, he's a prophet without honour, but here, in Gentile territory, a Canaanite woman calls Jesus *'Lord, Son of David'* and asks for his mercy on her. The Pharisees and teachers of the law don't accept him for who he is, but this Canaanite woman gets it straight away.

Jesus seemingly doesn't answer her plea, but the custom was that Rabbis didn't talk to women in public. So Jesus is silent while the disciples get increasingly agitated by her loud persistence and finally demand that Jesus sends the problem away. After all, it's *him* she's asking for.

Jesus' answer however, isn't to the woman, but to the disciples, and you sense that what follows is to be another teaching opportunity, to add flesh to the bones of what had gone before. *'I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel,'* he says, thus confirming his priority to the Jewish people. The Canaanite woman, on the other hand, probably caught the irony, and maybe even the humour of the statement. She probably said to herself: *"What are you doing here then? This is Gentile territory. You are outside the Land of Israel. There are very few lost sheep of the House of Israel here."* And, it's likely that she came to the realisation that Jesus was on her side. So she fell at his feet, worshipped him and said, *"Lord, help me!"*

Jesus' answer can be perceived as offensive. Jews called Gentiles *'dogs'*, and he says, *'It is not right to take the children's bread and toss it to their dogs.'* She

appears to accept the insult – maybe she’s worked out that the reply was more for the disciples than for her – and she retaliates with a quick reply, *‘Yes Lord, but even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table.’* Even the pet dogs are part of the family and have their share, albeit the leftovers.

In her response, the woman acknowledges the priority of the gospel to the Jewish people first, but is saying, *‘Even foreigners can grab the crumbs that the Jews reject.’* She put Jesus, who recently had 12 baskets of leftovers on his hands, on the spot, by demanding some of them. Here was a Gentile, believing in the Lord Jesus Christ, who wanted a share of what he’d come to bring.

And *this* is the lesson that the disciples have learned, albeit through a contentious exchange with a Canaanite woman. Jesus successfully gets the woman to express her faith in him, through which her daughter is then miraculously healed, *‘Woman, you have great faith!’* in contrast to his rebuke of Peter just a few days before on the lake, *‘O you of little faith!’*

And the disciples see, first hand, what Jesus has been saying all along – *Gentiles are included in God’s plan of salvation.* And Jesus uses a Gentile woman to demonstrate that the mission to the Gentiles begins with him. This gospel is for all nations. And the disciples need a change of heart to see it. A change of heart that welcomes the outsider, instead of rejecting them and sending them away.

Sometimes a change of heart comes from a change of perspective – seeing things from a different point of view. St Ignatius of Loyola was a great spiritual teacher who lived about 500 years ago. His teachings and insights are still very influential today for many Christians. He advised his followers – who are called ‘Jesuits’ – always to put the best possible interpretation on the words and actions of anyone they were listening to – to always think the best, not the worst. The model for this comes from the ministry of Jesus. For example, in today’s Gospel story, the disciples see an annoying mother shouting, but Jesus talks seriously with a mother desperately seeking help for her child.

How might our hearts and minds be changed if we see with the eyes of Jesus? How might we see differently people we otherwise find different, or difficult or disruptive? How might we welcome people into our community if we keep reminding ourselves to see them in the best possible light? How indeed?

Let us pray:

Living Lord, we praise you that you are a God who loves.
You have given us a marvellous world,

to live and share with all your people.
You, O God, love everyone equally,
and we thank you that we are each unique.
Help us to see ourselves and one another as you see us.
In Jesus' name, Amen.