

11th Sunday after Trinity: St Thomas on The Bourne, August 2023

I don't think we should beat about the bush...if the story of Jesus we have just heard is true, by which I mean 'accurate', then, in our terms, Jesus' attitude towards the Greek woman was deeply unpleasant and entirely unacceptable.

I am not going to try to exonerate him... I am going to assume that he really did call her a 'dog', at least by implication. It is a thoroughly offensive word, and although it was a word used by Jews towards Gentiles, and by Gentiles towards Jews, it still does not make it tolerable.

And I am not going to try to camouflage what happened by suggesting, as some have done, that Jesus was speaking teasingly and only pretended to reject the woman's cry, but actually knew what he was going to do... because if he knew in advance what he was going to do, then his attitude towards her was manipulative. Her daughter was ill...how could he play with her anguish just to score a theological point?

So, I dismiss that idea...and instead take the story simply as it is written. And in that case, it is genuinely shocking...

How then can we proceed?

Actually, I want to suggest that we who are Gentiles, owe that unnamed woman everything. She was in a desperate situation, her daughter was ill...and she turned to this Jewish man for help, only to have her heartfelt request thrown back in her face. She must have been a feisty and quick-witted soul, because she turned the offensive word 'dogs' to her advantage by implying that she accepted the word...but then added the classic 'however'...even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from the master's table. Touché.

That, I believe, was a turning point in Jesus' thinking. Up to that moment he had believed that his ministry and message were simply for his own people, the Jews. He regarded himself as inaugurating God's new age...an idea that was thoroughly and exclusively Jewish. And that sense of the specialness of the Jews went through Jewish history like the word 'Southend' goes through a stick of rock. Had not God chosen Abraham? Had not God chosen Moses? Had not God led his people to freedom through the Red Sea? Had not God chosen his prophets? Had not God arranged for David to become King? Gentiles did not get much of a look-in in that understanding of history. Gentiles were essentially and necessarily defined as the outsiders; those not chosen; they were people against whom the Jews defined their own identity.

And now there's this Gentile woman outsmarting this Jewish man and, by using his own terms in the discussion, helping him to realise that he needed to see himself and his ministry in much bigger terms...

I suspect that Jesus came away from that encounter deeply perplexed. He was Jewish. He was a man of his time and therefore, the categories by which he did his thinking were those of his time and those of his culture. But he had been challenged and the words that woman used about dogs and crumbs became a lever to overturn his worldview. His understanding of his ministry had now to encompass not only the Jews but also the Gentiles.

It is a great and lovely and powerful moment. But, of course, his disciples did not cotton on immediately. Because they were Jewish they too, after the Resurrection, continued, naturally, to think in Jewish categories...they went to the Temple to pray. They quoted the Old Testament to help them make sense of what was going on. They could not grasp at first that Jesus' ministry and life

enfolded everyone, Gentiles as well as Jews. Even Paul, immediately after his conversion, limited himself to preaching in synagogues. Only gradually were the disciples' minds changed. The great moment came when Peter returned to Jerusalem after baptising the Gentile, Cornelius, and reported to the other disciples that he himself had had a vision of a world in which there was neither clean nor unclean foods. Only then did the international and inclusive scope of Jesus' mission begin to dawn.

And, for me, that revolutionary insight began, not with Peter, nor with Paul, but with that wonderful Greek woman who challenged Jesus...it's perhaps the reason why the story was remembered and retold so vividly by Matthew and by Mark. Partly to reveal the crucial moment when Jesus changed his mind. Partly because it had ramifications for the Early Church, in which it became clear that the church should consist of Jews and Gentiles, men and women, slaves and free...as Paul wrote to the young church in Galatia: *There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus.* (Galatians 3, 8)

That was truly a radical and revolutionary message and might not have come about if that Gentile woman had not had the courage to stand up to Jesus and by doing so, provoked him to change his thinking.

The implications for all of us are plain, aren't they?

All of us, I include myself, think in categories with which we are happy and comfortable... but if that Gentile woman confronted us in the coming week, and challenged us to reconsider some of our deeply held ideas, I wonder whether we would be able to let go of some of our old ways of thinking and embrace the new and unfamiliar ...

Pray above all for an open and questing mind...

The Rt Revd Dr Christopher Herbert