

FARNHAM PARISH CHURCH

Church and Community

Date: Sunday 16 August 2020

Reading: Matthew 15:21-28

Theme: A woman's faith

Bible Reading: from Matthew 15:21-28

A Woman's Faith

²¹ Jesus left that place and went off to the territory near the cities of Tyre and Sidon. ²² A Canaanite woman who lived in that region came to him. "Son of David!" she cried out. "Have mercy on me, sir! My daughter has a demon and is in a terrible condition."

²³ But Jesus did not say a word to her. His disciples came to him and begged him, "Send her away! She is following us and making all this noise!"

²⁴ Then Jesus replied, "I have been sent only to the lost sheep of the people of Israel."

²⁵ At this the woman came and fell at his feet. "Help me, sir!" she said.

²⁶ Jesus answered, "It isn't right to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs."

²⁷ "That's true, sir," she answered, "but even the dogs eat the leftovers that fall from their masters' table."

²⁸ So Jesus answered her, "You are a woman of great faith! What you want will be done for you." And at that very moment her daughter was healed.

This is the second week we are looking at a story in the bible about stepping out in faith and risk-taking.

Last week it was Peter, stepping out of the boat and beginning to walk on water as he heard Jesus call him to come towards him. Jesus challenges him when he begins to sink and Jesus holds out his hand: You of little faith, why did you doubt?

This week it's an unnamed woman from a Canaanite background. Elsewhere in the gospels she is described as coming from Syro-Phoenicia, territory outside the borders of Palestine, 30 and 50 miles respectively away from Galilee. All we know about her really is that she is a mum, her daughter is seriously ill and she seems to think that Jesus can do something about this.

There are so many interesting aspects to this simple little story which are worth a mention:

Jesus has deliberately, it seems, gone off piste - to Tyre and Sidon – an area away from his normal patch

The woman who approaches him is a Canaanite – ie she is not Jewish.

The woman calls Jesus by an apparently Jewish name or title “Son of David”, and she seeks his help “have mercy on me, sir!”

The woman’s diagnosis takes account of the fact that her daughter may have a demon – in other words she has a sense in which this might be a spiritual illness, not just a psychological one. It sounds like she may have heard of Jesus by reputation and knows that he does stuff with demons or illness or both. It sounds like she knows he is in the healing business.

What happens next is just strange. Jesus did not say a word to her.

Was he tired at the end of a busy preaching and healing trip? Had he had enough demons for one day and this was one more he could do without? Or was he just waiting to see how this unexpected encounter would pan out?

His disciples join in with the apparent not responding or helping. “Send her away,” they say, “she is following us and making all this noise”. It’s difficult to know whether this meant that she should be disregarded and dismissed or have her request dealt with and leave satisfied.

Now Jesus speaks: *“I have been sent only to the lost sheep of the people of Israel.”*

Interestingly, it is not entirely clear who Jesus is speaking to here.

If he is speaking to the disciples, is he confirming their being annoyed and maybe even letting them know they have done the right thing in trying to let him not be distracted. Or is he remind them of his primary focus – first to the Jews?

If, on the other hand, he is speaking to the women, he is being very personal. He is, in other words, saying to her: you are not Jewish. I have not come to help you.

One commentator wonders whether it is a statement at all and not rather a questions, as punctuation in scripture is added not original to the text. Read this way Jesus would be wondering to himself in the face of her obvious distress and clear need for help: *“Have I been sent only to the lost sheep of the people of Israel.”*

Although this all might sound a bit harsh, this is the heart of the mission Jesus had come to fulfil – first to the Jews and through them to the rest of the world. That, of course, is why we have the OT scripture. That’s why we see the coming of Jesus as the fulfilment of OT prophecy. That’s why we identify Jesus as the Messiah, the Christ, the promised one, the Jewish one.

And maybe that’s why Jesus was apparently rather tough with this woman. Maybe he wants to see how strong her faith is. Another commentator says it’s a bit like a typical exchange with a rabbi and his student – being slightly provocative to get to the heart of the matter and to get the student to learn through the conversation.

Whatever it is, she, although unnamed and unknown is mightily persistent. She appeals to him again and throws herself at him:

²⁵ At this the woman came and fell at his feet. "Help me, sir!" she said.

This time, Jesus is definitely speaking to her, up close and personal if she is still at his feet:

²⁶ Jesus answered, "It isn't right to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs."

Although Jesus is using illustration his meaning if it is indeed a statement could not be clearer. The Jews are the children of Israel, the children of God. The dogs are those who are not Jewish, the Gentiles – people like you and like me. Or is it further wondering in the heart and mind of Jesus, and should it be framed as a personal question Jesus is wrestling with?

²⁶ Jesus answered, "Is it right to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs."

We might have thought that was the end of it but oh no, she has one final go at getting what she is after:

²⁷ "That's true, sir," she answered, "but even the dogs eat the leftovers that fall from their masters' table."

In other words, even though I am not born into the chosen race, I can still see that you have something to offer and

not just for the Jews but for the whole world. Even for me and for my daughter.

It's a bit like the shepherds and the wise men at Christmas. The shepherds are the Jewish people who come rushing in from abiding in the fields; the wise men come from afar. Jesus is a supernatural gift to both/ and not either/ or.

It's a bit like a foretaste of what is to come with Peter (walking on water last week in a Jewish environment) but in the future he will come to see that Jesus has come for everyone, like Cornelius the Roman centurion and the vision of food that can be eaten by all in Acts chapter 10.

And this then leads to the most remarkable bit of all. Jesus responds with great reassurance for and encouragement of the woman. Jesus replies with these words:

²⁸ So Jesus answered her, "You are a woman of great faith! What you want will be done for you." And at that very moment her daughter was healed.

Jesus commends her for her great faith even though she is outside the chosen people group. He agrees to do what she has so persistently asked him to do. And the daughter is made well.

What then are the takeaways from this simple little story? I want to suggest that there are two:

Being persistent may pay off in the long run

Jesus has indeed come to engage with everyone everywhere

Being persistent may pay off in the long run

Bishop Jo in her sermon on this passage this week refers us to the slave traders and to those who were so persistent in seeking abolition.

We have found it interesting that our daughter Zoë and her husband Ed have lived in two of the most infamous ports associated with the slave trade in this country: Bristol and Liverpool. There are seagulls everywhere in both cities (a reminder of their sea-faring past) and there are museums and (until recently) statues (a reminder of their trading history).

People prayed and worked and hoped and dreamed of an end to this evil industry. And although slavery may now be outlawed in this country, discrimination and prejudice against those of other races is still not eradicated as we might have hoped it would be, people trafficking is still an awful reality still.

It was in Liverpool that Anthony lived, the young boy whose imagined life was played out recently in the powerful BBC drama of that name. It's on the football pitches that names are called and talented black players are wantonly abused still.

Like the Canaanite woman, we can and should pray on ... we should take the example of her persistence to heart and not give up. Like the reformed slave trader and hymn writer John Newton or the abolitionist MP William Wilberforce, we too can persevere in praying for the things we care about. Bringing them to Jesus knowing he can heal and restore.

Being persistent may pay off in the long run

And the second thing ...

Jesus has indeed come to engage with everyone everywhere

Although Covid 19 has been horrific and at times has taken the lives of people we know, affected others with long-term illness and made still others frightened to venture out, it has also reminded us that the churches across the land can play a vital part still in the spreading of the gospel in words and deeds for the communities in which we live and the people who live here whom we seek to serve.

How interesting it is to note that while the High Street big names are closing down and, in some cases, disappearing from the scene altogether, there is still a church in every community, village, town and city. How interesting to note that while the banks may be closing near us, there a branch of the church still in every place, in every parish, in every community.

The C of E – whatever its many faults and failings – is here not just for those who like that kind of thing at 10am on a Sunday. We are here for the nation, and we, in this place, in Farnham, are here for our neighbours: loving God, living faith and serving community.

Church families all around the country have been conspicuous in supporting foodbank, caring for neighbours, offering practical help in ways we have not seen for years. Of course, Christians are not the only ones who have engaged like this, but we are the only ones who have done it because Jesus conspicuously showed us the way.

Jesus has indeed come to engage with everyone everywhere

Let's pray together ...

God of Mission, who alone brings growth to your Church, send your Holy Spirit to give Vision to our planning, Wisdom to our actions, and Power to our witness. Help our church to grow in numbers, in spiritual commitment to you, and in service to our local community, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.