

16th August 2020

Even the dogs *Cholsey 8am Moulford*
Matthew 15: 21 – 28

Matthew 15 ²¹ *Leaving that place, Jesus withdrew to the region of Tyre and Sidon.* ²² *A Canaanite woman from that vicinity came to him, crying out, 'Lord, Son of David, have mercy on me! My daughter is demon-possessed and suffering terribly.'*

²³ *Jesus did not answer a word. So his disciples came to him and urged him, 'Send her away, for she keeps crying out after us.'*

²⁴ *He answered, 'I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel.'*

²⁵ *The woman came and knelt before him. 'Lord, help me!' she said.*

²⁶ *He replied, 'It is not right to take the children's bread and toss it to the dogs.'*

²⁷ *'Yes it is, Lord,' she said. 'Even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table.'*

²⁸ *Then Jesus said to her, 'Woman, you have great faith! Your request is granted.' And her daughter was healed at that moment.*

Black lives matter campaign: Jesus's strange and apparently ungracious response - so unlike him! We might think: "What's going on here?" Two things

First, *Imagine you are working flat out to produce a vaccine for Covid-19. In fact, you are heading the only team doing this. And then someone comes along and begs you to set up a clinic say in poor part of London one weekend where the need is great. You don't doubt your ability to do it but you fear that once you start such a project, it will be almost impossible to lay it down. As a result, you won't enable the vaccine to be produced and 10's of 1,000s will suffer.*

You might say, first I must finalise the production of this vaccine and then I can turn my attention to you.

In the same way Jesus had a very clear and focussed mission:

viz: v. 24 *He answered, 'I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel.'*

Jesus's mission to focus on Israel. Why? Just to benefit Israel?

No because the way God had chosen to save the whole world was to choose a specific people Israel not just bless them for their own sakes but in time to be a blessing to the whole world – viz promise to Abraham – *through your seed all nations will be blessed.* Viz e.g. the hospice movement – *had to be started in one particular community.*

Now sadly the people of Israel, being human like the rest of us, had utterly failed to live up their vocation to bless the world. They had often become inward looking and sought to exclude other nations. However, rather than abandon his promises to Israel, God chose to fulfil them by sending his Son, Jesus

So Jesus knew before he could be a blessing to the Gentiles he had to complete his work in Israel.

Moreover, if Jesus' ministry in Galilee and Judaea were anything to go by, responding to this Gentile woman's need might well end up not being an isolated incident, but open the floodgates as she goes and tells others of what Jesus has done, and crowds start arriving to seek healing. In fact in the very next passage suggests that that is *exactly* what happened.

Jesus' work would only be completed on the cross. Until that was accomplished Jesus knew he had to maintain his focus on Israel.

Secondly – (possibility) this is a learning process not just for the disciples but Jesus himself.

The reason for not responding may have been good: not being diverted from his mission in life to proclaim the Kingdom of God to Israel, but Jesus was also wonderfully open to the voice of his heavenly Father, to the prompting of the Holy Spirit.

When He sees the woman's faith, it's as if he can hear his Father saying this woman is the exception, she is clearly someone who wants to be part of our Kingdom, so feel free to give her the blessings of the Kingdom.

Note the extent and nature of the woman's faith

Lord, Son of David - This is a title for the Messiah, God's promised anointed King. She recognises that Jesus is none other than that Messiah.

Secondly, It is a wonderfully *humble* faith. She is happy to recognise that she is not entitled to anything from the Messiah as of right, but maybe just to enjoy the crumbs that fall from the table (her response is reflected in the prayer of *Humble access* that we shall be praying later as *we* come to the Lord's table).

Thirdly, she perhaps recognises in a way that even Jesus' own disciples do not, that ultimately it is the God of Israel's purpose to bless not just Israel but all peoples, including her and her family. Maybe she had once heard our OT reading from Isaiah 56 vv.6, 7 *And foreigners who bind themselves to the LORD... to love the name of the LORD, ...⁷ these I will bring to my holy mountain and give them joy in my house of prayer.*

It's like she's saying *if that is the ultimate plan,*

give me just a crumb of it now by healing my daughter.

Jesus cannot resist such faith. His heart is won over.

Maybe her faith and tenacity remind him also of those words from Isaiah.

What does this story have to teach us today ?

We can learn from each of the characters in it?

First from Jesus's openness to God. We may think we know what is right, but sometimes God wants to shake us up and sometimes it is through the most unlikely people. The person we might be tempted to think is beyond the pale. But God can speak to us even through them. We need to have the humility and openness of heart to the prompting of God's Holy Spirit to recognise those moments.

Secondly, from the woman. Sometimes when we pray for something that is really important, it seems that God is silent just as Jesus was at first.

But the woman did not give up. She argued and persevered. And when we do that with a humble and open heart like hers, it seems God loves it.

I don't know why God does not always answer prayers straight away except that sometimes it seems the process of waiting, praying, arguing with him is part of the way He transforms us and enables us to grow.

Thirdly, the disciples. It is easy like them to have a "them and us" attitude, to write certain people off as being beyond God's grace. Ironically and tragically, some Christians have done that with regard to the Jews, especially in the last century, and we even be tempted to do that today with the way Israel has treated Palestine in recent years

The passage we heard for the Epistle from *Romans 11* reminds how wrong that is. Paul was writing to a Gentile church in a city and culture which despised the Jews. Paul reminds them and us that God has not given up on Israel, He still has a purpose for her as well.