

The Canaanite Woman

For those who like their geography and history - Tyre and Sidon were the two main Phoenician cities north of the sea of Galilee on the coast. In Old Testament times this was the region of the Phoenicians better known as the Canaanite tribes. Canaanite does not refer to one specific ethnic group but an amalgamation of different (probably as many as 12) groups living in the land of Canaan. The Canaanites were pagan and their presence was a strong threat to the purity of Israel's religion and morality. There was a long history of spiritual and military conflict between the Israelites and the Canaanites. In fact in Deuteronomy 7 v2 God commanded Israel to "completely destroy them".

Interestingly by Jesus's time the term Canaanite was not often used – it would be a bit like someone calling New York - New Amsterdam - today!

But it would have resonated with Matthew's audience. He wrote his gospel to encourage and support Jewish Christians. They would have realised that not only was this woman a gentile but also from an enemy race.

Why had Jesus even gone there? He had withdrawn himself from the conflict he had been having with the Pharisees, the Jewish leaders who were rejecting him. He was controlling the timing of things. He didn't want people to make him king and he didn't want confrontation with his enemies to come to a head too soon. So we frequently read in the gospels that "he withdraws" himself, to take the heat out of situations.

So, this woman was brought up a pagan – but she had obviously heard about Jesus. There had been no help or relief for her daughter from her pagan gods but she's heard of this miracle worker and he's now in her land. She's desperate to find respite and healing for her child.

She comes to him in humility but speaks assertively. She is certain of his divine power – she calls him Son of David – a title we would expect to hear from Jews but not a Gentile – it suggests that she understands the Old Testament prophecy – something that so many of the Jews had missed. She even uses language from Jewish prayer – "have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David".

Jesus's initial lack of response to her and then the disciples keenness to shoo her away and make her shut up - reflected that she would have had very little standing in society. For a start she was female – and women would not normally speak to men directly in public. Secondly she was a Gentile, Jews viewed them as unsaved and therefore unworthy of salvation. And finally, Jews would have assumed that having a demon possessed child was divine punishment for an individual's sin and this made her even more untouchable.

She was being audacious approaching him. She even knelt before him. Kneeling before someone is either an act of respect or an act of worship. She recognised him as deserving her highest respect.

When Jesus did respond to her "I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel" his answer is reflecting his primary mission as the Jewish Messiah, his mission was first to Israel and it would be his disciples who would take his ministry further into all the world.

If she had been proud like so many of the people Jesus had been encountering in Galilee she would probably have left right then. But she wasn't proud, she was humble. She understood his message and accepted it. He hadn't come specifically for her or for people like her.

But she still persisted and continued with her plea.

He then tells her "It is not right to take the children's bread and toss it to the dogs."

Here the Jews are the "children", the "bread" God's blessings and the Gentiles the "dogs".

But her response is marvellous – she agrees with him - she understands what he's saying that the blessings are primarily for the children - but by saying that even the dogs can eat the crumbs dropped by the children, she is acknowledging that as a gentile she may not be able to sit at the Messiah's table and eat with him - but she should be allowed to pick up some of the crumbs dropped onto the floor. She just wanted a crumb of his mercy.

In Israel Jesus was trying to convince the Jewish leaders he was the Messiah and was being challenged to prove it. But here in Gentile territory he meets a woman who hardly knows him - but who is convinced he IS the Messiah and despite trying he can't discourage her.

His rejection does not stop this mother's love from persisting in seeking healing for her child. His delay in granting her request actually brought out in her a greater measure of faith.

So - what should we take away with us today from this story?

Such perseverance should be the mark of all of us, every Christian – but sadly it isn't always the case. Too often we give up when we do not receive a quick reply to our requests. We may even get discouraged thinking that he doesn't hear us or is ignoring us.

Jesus never blames anyone for asking. Hard though it may be, some situations are not changed, sorted or healed as we want them or when we want them. But we can ask and seek God, being open to what he IS doing, not just focussed on what he's not done.

Also we can easily be guilty of labelling people as "other" and putting them 'under the table' or pushing people away and wanting them to shut up like the disciples did here. We must remember that God's love and blessings are for everyone.

Think of ourselves - our diversity; of background, experience, theology and expectation is a strength, it's to be cherished. All are welcome, no-one is excluded.

Let's now end with the prayer taken from our first reading – Psalm 67

May God be gracious to us and bless us
and make his face shine on us—^[a]

²so that your ways may be known on earth,
your salvation among all nations.

Amen

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