

## **Matthew 15:21-28**

Leaving that place, Jesus withdrew to the region of Tyre and Sidon. <sup>22</sup> 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."

<sup>23</sup> 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."

<sup>24</sup> He answered, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel."

<sup>25</sup> The woman came and knelt before him. "Lord, help me!" she said.

<sup>26</sup> He replied, "It is not right to take the children's bread and toss it to the dogs."

<sup>27</sup> "Yes it is, Lord," she said. "Even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table."

<sup>28</sup> Then Jesus said to her, "Woman, you have great faith! Your request is granted." And her daughter was healed at that moment.

## **Jesus and the 'Canaanite' woman who changed his mind**

I have a bunch of problems with the story of Jesus and the Canaanite woman, and you probably have too. Jesus ignores her at first, then he calls her a dog and refuses to help, before actually helping her. Why does he say that his calling is only to the lost sheep of Israel? Why does Matthew identify her as Canaanite, when Mark calls her Syrophenician? How does she know to call him 'son of David'? What is her religious position? And how does this passage relate to the discussion immediately preceding this, in which Jesus is very relaxed about Jewish distinctiveness laws? And how does this shape our Christian practice today?

In the text immediately preceding this the pharisees accuse Jesus of being soft on the law, and particularly the parts of Jewish law that create distinctiveness — the holiness code and the food laws. Jesus says, effectively, 'never mind the food and the cleanliness, what you say and do matters much more'. He's saying that all the efforts of first century Jews to maintain their racial and religious purity were in vain.

Now, he and the disciples leave territorial Israel, and head into the region of Tyre and Sidon, which is to say, Phoenicia, the country famous for its merchants and sea people. Who were the ancestors of the Phoenicians? The Canaanites — the ones whom Joshua drove from the promised land, the ones who had been condemned for their worship of Baal, Asherah, Astarte, Dagon and the practices that went with this. Now, why does Matthew highlight this Canaanite heritage? To make a point — about how unfitting she was for Jesus's blessings (according to Israel's expectations) and that Jesus blesses her anyway.

While on this subject, we should note the way that Jesus treats the Canaanite woman — she comes repeatedly calling for mercy on her daughter, and we read that Jesus did not answer a word. Is this the Jesus we know? The disciples ask him to send her away (it's not clear if they are urging him to send her away happy or frustrated), and he replies to them 'I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel'. Does this really move us forward? Well — it is actually the point of this passage.

You see, he is clearly right, if rather blunt. Jesus restricts his life and his ministry to Israel, with only minor excursions across the borders. Jesus is the light to those who should already have the light. He makes God known more fully to those who ought to know their God. And he does so through parables and teaching, disputing with pharisees and temple leaders, and through signs of the kingdom of God. But Jesus is also 'the salvation prepared in the sight of every nation, a light for revelation to the Gentiles...' as Simeon says in Luke 2. Ok...

So this is not simply racism, or exclusivism, but about addressing the purpose for which Israel was chosen. When we elect officials we expect them to do a job... but the job also bears associated privileges. When God 'elected' Israel it was not for the sake of giving privileges, but so that they could know him, *and make God known to the world* through their more civilised, more enlightened way of being. Jesus (and all the prophets) accuse Israel of accepting the privilege but failing to be the role model that was their job.

Indeed, Jesus's mission is to reveal, first, who God is, to the people who should already know. It becomes the work of the disciples, led by Paul, to preach the good news to the gentiles.

But to reiterate, the point was never that the Lord should be the exclusive territorial god of Israel, but that all the world should know this God through Israel. The Canaanite woman seems to understand this very well! She dares to ask, she dares to persist when she doesn't get an answer, and she dares to answer back to a man she recognises as a man of God. She's got a nerve!

And this is the only way I can get around Jesus's rudeness to her. I think Jesus is quoting to her the attitude of other Jews. 'Why should a gentile get the blessings intended for the Jews?' And so she answers that the Jews are careless, and she will gladly accept the blessings that they have been careless with — she's not too proud to accept the "left-unders". Her faith, shown through relentless persistence is amazing. And what alerts us to this faith — besides this persistence — is the way she addresses him.

A famous previous Phoenician had been Jezebel. It was Jezebel who had led King Ahab into Baal worship, and with him the rest of the northern part of Israel. She had murdered hundreds of prophets. *This* Phoenician woman, however, comes out to seek Jesus, and calls him son of David, and 'sir'. This isn't merely a punt. She has **faith**. She has the faith that is lacking in so many of the people Jesus meets in Israel. She trusts Jesus to heal her daughter.

She also has **understanding**. She seems to know that Jesus must sort out Israel before the gospel spreads, but she knows that the gospel is for her and her people too. Extraordinary!

How does this passage shape our practice today?

There's two points that strike me from this. The first is **her persistence** in search for healing. Our Canaanite woman, hearing he was in the area, came to find Jesus, pleaded for her daughter, went on doing so when he initially ignored her, and when he challenged her, she showed a depth of understanding that many of us still lack. She **persisted**, knowing that Jesus's nature was loving, and that he had the power to heal, and that she was no less worthy of receiving that blessing. Which of us is so confident? So, be confident, not in yourself, but God's love for you, and persist in prayer, knowing that God heals now, as he did then.

Secondly — Jesus has a funny way of showing it in this story, but his nature is **always to love, always to bless**. And the point of Israel was always to be a role model: always to love, always to bless. And what is the point of being a Christian now? Is it about privilege? Pie in the sky when you die? No, we are **always to love, always to bless**, always to do the right thing.

- That means: hearing the story of others and caring
- That means taking the side of the underdog.
- That means being a friend to the lonely, even if you have enough friends.

We sometimes think that God expects us to believe and behave, before we can belong and be blessed. I don't think it works like that. I think Jesus blesses those who don't belong or even believe, let alone behave, but after those *blessings*, they soon *belong, believe and behave*. I think Jesus blesses, and we must too. And despite his mission being for the lost sheep of Israel, the purpose of that was always, already, in order to bless all people everywhere for all time.

SDG.

# *Harvest Celebration*

## *Service*

### *Bring-a-Tin*

*9.30am Sunday 27<sup>th</sup>*

**All gifts of  
non-perishable  
foods will go to  
Leiston Food  
Bank**



**Money donations to the  
work of**



*The Church will reopen for gifts Saturday  
26<sup>th</sup>*