

16 August 2020 – Deborah Hodge

Matthew 15: 21 – 28

The Canaanite Woman's Faith

Let us pray: Lord please speak to us today and let your word take root in our hearts and in our lives.

Well this is a strange story! Jesus seems to be acting in a very uncharacteristic manner. He ignores a woman's desperate plea for help and displays racism. Not what we expect. And not what we have been taught.

I was told by a vicar many years ago that when you come to a passage of scripture which startles you – look out! God is trying to tell you something so pay attention. Maybe that is the case here

Jesus is in the district of Tyre and Sidon – apparently the only time he went outside his native country and beyond Jewish territory. He is in a foreign land. People have speculated why he left Palestine. Perhaps it was because his earthly ministry was coming towards an end and he was setting his face towards Jerusalem – and death. He needed space to prepare himself and his disciples for what lay ahead, and he couldn't do that in Palestine where he was followed everywhere by crowds – both by those who wanted to hear him and by his enemies who wanted to catch him out.

In Tyre and Sidon he could be fairly sure of some privacy perhaps. But no – even in these foreign lands he is besieged! A local Canaanite woman begs him to help her daughter who is tormented by a demon. She must have heard about this man and his healing miracles and in desperation for her child she comes shouting after him. She begs for mercy for herself – identifying herself completely with her sick child, as a mother does. Healing for one will be healing for the other.

And Jesus ignores her! I can't think of anywhere else in the Gospels where he deliberately ignores such a cry. It just doesn't sound right.

The disciples meanwhile are clearly fed up with the woman and they advise Jesus to send her away. She is getting on their nerves with her continual

shouting. Poor woman, she is not having a good time at all – and then it gets worse!

Jesus tells her that he is only there to help his own people, the lost sheep of Israel. In other words – not people like you! (Hmmm – sound familiar?)- but she is not to be put off by that! She comes and kneels in front of him asking ‘Lord, help me’. Who can doubt her desperation and her sincerity? Her boldness and her humility. It must have cost her a lot to put herself forward in that way – a foreigner and a woman. In Jewish society she would have had very little status and yet she dares to stop Jesus in his tracks.

His answer seems unkind and a bit rude to us – taking the children’s food and giving it to the dogs - to her it must have felt like a slap in the face. Dogs in those days were not the pampered pets we share our homes with, but kept only for their usefulness as working animals. More often they would be feral scavengers living off refuse, regarded as ritually unclean by the strictly pious. To be compared with a dog in middle eastern culture was and still is a really serious insult. Jewish people would speak of ‘gentile dogs’, infidel dogs and – later – Christian dogs.

But even that doesn’t stop this woman! She comes back as quick as a flash ‘even the dogs eat the crumbs under their masters table’ She is not denying – or accepting – the description but rises above the apparent insult with quick repartee and even humour. And Jesus openly affirms her and her faith, curing her daughter instantly.

People have speculated over the deeper meaning of this tale. Some have thought that Jesus meant to heal the child all along. We don’t normally see him refusing to help people in need. Quite the opposite! He is constantly moved with compassion and surely would have felt the same for this poor woman and her daughter. Children were important to him. And he was kind to the Roman centurion – who would also be regarded as an enemy and an outsider. He healed his slave. So maybe he was drawing out the woman’s faith by argument, seeing into her heart and knowing that she would be able to answer him back. He was perhaps using her as a living example to show his disciples that faith in him was not limited to the Jews, the chosen people, but would extend to the ends of the world.

Or did Jesus actually change his mind having been taken aback by the woman's riposte? Was his initial prejudice against the foreigner broken down by the faith he found in this woman, and did he come to realise in that encounter that his mission was to be a worldwide one. If we accept that Jesus was both fully human and fully divine, perhaps this is his human side needing to expand its understanding of his ministry. After all He would have been brought up fully believing in his national identity as a Jew, one of a chosen race, special to God. Such a belief can (although it need not) encourage belief that all other races are inferior. Especially the Canaanites who were longstanding enemies of the Jews. But here is a foreigner – and worse still, a woman – clearly expressing an amazing and sincere depth of faith. Was that a moment of realisation for our Lord? Certainly by the end of Matthew's gospel we see the risen Christ telling his disciples that their commission is to make disciples of all nations and baptise them in the name of the father, the son and the holy spirit. And this is what they did.

In our reading from Romans Paul is struggling with the same issue. He also was a devout Jew, a Pharisee of Pharisees with all that implied. If the good news of Jesus is just for the Jews why are they not all convinced by the appearance of their Messiah and has God now abandoned them because of their failure. And how is he to account for the genuine faith and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit seen in Gentile people, who previously he would have regarded as 'lesser breeds without the law'?

He comes to the conclusion that God's nature is to be merciful to all. The Gospel is – for all. And surely that must be right. God is the God of the whole world - our faith is not limited to one special set of people nor is it a series of complicated rules which have to be learnt. No, our faith is a person – the living person of Jesus Christ. And his arms are open wide. In Christ there is neither Jew nor Gentile, male or female, slave or free – all are one in him. It is for the tiniest baby and the wisest professor, the learned and the simple, the poor and the rich – it is for me and it is for you. We can all boldly claim the promises of Jesus – as boldly and as humbly as that Canaanite woman. Whichever way you look at it we have a lot to thank her for! Amen

