

Reflection: 20 August 2023

The Canaanite Woman

By Rev. Dr. Fei Taule'ale'ausumai

"For it is not right to take the food of the children and throw it to the dogs."

I wonder what it would feel like if we had to rush to the doctors or to the hospital looking desperately for a doctor to heal our sick child and receptionist at the window serves someone else ahead of us because we are the wrong colour or unable to speak English or wearing the wrong clothes. And to add insult to injury she then has the audacity to ask us to go outside and wait whilst others are offered a warm room and a chair to sit in. We go outside only to find that the only other things waiting outside were the dogs of the owners inside the clinic. Am I really making this comparison with the reading we just had from the Gospel of Matthew? Surely this man Jesus who is the Christ, the Messiah could not stoop so low as to treat a fellow human being with disdain and insult this woman to her face!

When I visited the Apartheid museum in Johannesburg in South Africa it was unbelievable to think that a whole nation would stoop so low as to define and categorise people because of their race and skin colour. You were either Black, coloured or white and, if you were white, then you received a much more privileged life. In mixed race families there were cases where a child was born white and another black; both same biological parents and both destined to live extremely different lives: one of privilege and the other underprivileged. Any colour other than white was unfortunate and unlucky. In India, many Hindus find Christianity attractive and acceptable because there is no caste system and all are equal in the sight of the Christian God. But there are reports that some Christians who come from the upper castes (i.e. Brahmin class) refuse to serve communion to Indians of lower castes and especially the untouchables or Dalit castes. Some of you may have watched Kevin McLeod's documentary on his two weeks stay in Mumbai formerly Bombay. Last week he spent a night sharing a slum home with 21 family members in literally 2 rooms. It was only after going out to the rubbish dump to work with people recycling rubbish for 1 pound a day that he realized how wrong his perception of life was. On his return visit to this same family the following week, where

they lived and how they lived didn't seem so bad after all. Life took on a completely different perspective when he experienced the desperate measures people went to day in day out just to provide an existence for their families.

Earlier this week we saw how migrant workers were squeezed into a 3 bedroom houses in South Auckland, they had no money, no food and all paid thousands of dollars to come to New Zealand with the promise of employment and a future for their families.

Perhaps from an Indian context Jesus was a Brahmin and this woman a Dalit and untouchable.

In the context of the Middle East for Jesus to call this Gentile woman a dog meant that she was unclean and shouldn't be hanging around Jews.

You all know by now that I am a lover of dogs and many people tell me that Peanut and Snoopy are very spoilt dogs, in fact they think they are human being. They have their own beds, their own heater, their own wardrobe and their own dog insurance. For some of us dogs become part of the family. There is a recorded story about how a woman named Leona Helmsley left \$12m in her will for her dog. So what's so bad about being a dog?— especially if you are Leona Helmsley's dog?

In 1st century Palestine, there was no such thing as domestic dogs. The only dogs around were wild dogs, roaming the wilderness, scavengers, eating unclean animals and even human carcasses. (*Isaac, 2009*) I wonder if this was the sort of dog that Jesus was referring to when he told the woman from Syrophenician when she went seeking healing for her daughter from him that *"Let the children be fed first. For it is not right to take the food of the children and throw it to the dogs."* She replied and said to Him, *"Lord, even the dogs under the table eat the children's scraps."*

This is an interesting story the woman kneels before Jesus and begs him "Have mercy on me Lord, Son of David, my daughter is tormented by a demon." She addresses Jesus as both Lord and Son of David, words that a Jew might use for the Messiah – but she is a Canaanite woman. This woman is doubly an

outsider, a foreigner and a woman. The interesting thing is that Jesus does not immediately respond to her yet throughout the Gospels Jesus immediately responds to anyone who cries out to him for mercy, salvation, or healing. We could make excuses for him and say that he must have been so tired from the crowds and this get away retreat was rudely disturbed by a stranger?

The disciples offended by the woman's screaming ask Jesus to send her away. It is not clear whether they want to just get rid of her or give her what she wants so that she will leave.

It is inconceivable to think that Jesus was literally calling this woman and her daughter "a dog." If anyone were to refer to any of us here as a dog especially of the female variety we would be very offended and might even offer a similar expletive in response or retaliation.

This woman is asking for healing and Jesus responds basically saying that his own people "the children of Israel" are his priority, why would I want to use his gifts on second class citizens or worse still dogs? But isn't her response brilliant "Lord, even the dogs under the table eat the children's scraps." Then He said to her, "For saying this, you may go. The demon has gone out of your daughter." When the woman went home, she found the child lying in bed and the demon gone. Jesus metaphorically refers to the Jews as children and to the Gentiles as pups. In effect, he seems to be calling the woman's daughter a dog. But, just as in a household the leftover scraps are given to the household dogs who usually wait beneath the table, the woman argues so Gentiles should be able to benefit too from the ministry of Jesus.

Because the woman believed and stood up to Jesus, her daughter was cured. Faith, no matter whether one is a Jew or a Gentile, is what characterizes an authentic disciple of Jesus. It is a woman who gets the best of Jesus. Mark is particularly sensitive to women and their needs. They occupy key positions throughout the Gospel. Why? Because in general they were powerless people. This story shows that it is the powerless who are really powerful.

Here in Syro-Phoenicia something different, something radically new happens. A Canaanite woman challenges Jesus. This woman doesn't really care that she doesn't belong. The suffering of her daughter compels her to

violate boundaries, to go where she shouldn't, to beg from strangers. Desperation can make you go crazy. When you care about something so much—it's all you can think about—and you feel like your hands are tied, you go crazy.

The woman is saying that God's grace and God's love is for everyone. The Syrophenian woman represents those outsiders. Who are we to judge those called by God? The Christian community can and should include those quite different to ourselves. This woman is different in ethnic background, religion and outlook. That does not matter. What counts is her faith, and to a lesser extent, her intelligence and wit. We must extend the same openness to those different to ourselves and our communities.

It seems to me that this reading is about the universality of the Gospel – it is not limited to a geographical area, a certain kind of person, a particular situation. Furthermore, Jesus enables people to hear the Good News and to speak it. And again there are no limits. We should expect the unexpected in our Christian walk.

This story innocently portrays Jesus expressing a racist stance only to abandon it when put under pressure. The abandonment of prejudice, the crossing of the traditional boundary, is the good news of the story and why it was told. It is hard not to draw the conclusion that Jesus, himself, had to make a transition, had to learn. His response was more typical of the rather conservative Judaism of the time.

Is it embarrassing to recognise and be reminded of the humanity of Jesus, that at the end of the day Jesus was human, too? Does it make the gospel any less valid if the historical Jesus also had to struggle to come to terms with the negative in his upbringing? (Loader). This story remains relevant for us today. Who are we to judge those called by God? The Christian community can and should include those quite different to ourselves. We must extend the same openness to those different to ourselves and our communities.

We are invited to love one another as we love ourselves, go then and do likewise. Amen.