

Matthew 15:21-28 (Canaanite woman)

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be pleasing to you, Lord God, our Creator, Redeemer and Comforter.

Well, this passage from Matthew's Gospel is a challenge, isn't it?! Jesus' attitude and language in his encounter with the Canaanite woman is shocking. She's simply seeking help for her daughter. First he is silent, refusing to acknowledge her. Then he says his mission is only to the house of Israel. And finally he insults her. The incident raises deep questions about prejudice, exclusion and the limits of God's mercy. We expect Jesus to act differently. And you may expect me to soften his response and explain it away. But we need to remember that Jesus doesn't always do what we expect; he doesn't always conform to what we hope for.

The conversation happens within a series of Jesus' miracles and teachings that we've been hearing over the last few weeks, with the crowds gathering around him. Although we know the crowds *did* include women and children, although we know that women and children *were* healed, this is the first time we have heard the voice of a woman who is not obedient or humble or grateful. Here we have a woman whose voice is raised in debate with Jesus. She clearly already knows a good deal about him and his reputation as a healer. She addresses him with respect as Lord, as the Son of David – acknowledging his ancestry. But while accepting that mercy may begin with Israel, she knows it cannot end there. She recognises that Israel's Messiah will ultimately bring blessing to the whole world. And she demands it now. She believes that what would happen in the future, could happen now, for her daughter, despite her not being a Jew.

She has no name and neither does her daughter (nothing new there, in the Gospels). She appears without the protection of a man – no husband, brother, father or son is mentioned. She's identified only by her relationship with her daughter – and in the patriarchal society of 1st century Palestine, that makes them both very vulnerable. She's also identified as a Gentile – as a foreigner - a member of the people historically regarded by Israel as their enemy. Her ethnicity, heritage, religion and gender separate her from Jewish social norms, marking her as an outsider. Matthew's Jewish audience would immediately have understood the significance of Jesus engaging with this woman as she breaks through those barriers to claim God's mercy.

But it still amazes me, that after she has asked Jesus for help, Matthew says: "But Jesus gave her no reply, not even a word. Then his disciples urged him to send her away - "She is bothering us."" Jesus completely ignores her. He doesn't respond with compassion but with silence. His disciples are disturbed by her presence, by her begging and her noise. They show no concern for the needs of

her daughter. Maybe they were exposing their prejudice against her or maybe they saw her as an inconvenience, getting in the way of their plans for the day. They certainly didn't see the situation as an opportunity to minister to her and her daughter. (I wonder if we sometimes get so caught up in our own busy-ness, that we aren't aware of the needs of those around us who need our help, especially those who might appear different to us?)

Jesus draws specific attention to her Gentile status and why she is not his immediate priority, saying he "was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel". Is Jesus simply interested in one people, one land, one national story? Israel first. After all, Jesus was a Jew, he did belong to this particular group of people. He shared their stories, culture and customs.

Nationalism is a two-edged sword, isn't it? It's okay to be proud of our heritage, our culture, our identity. But we need to beware when nationalism puts "us" first – our interests, our borders, our well-being, our prosperity, our safety; when it requires others to be less significant than us. When it turns them into threats and denies their humanity. I'm sure we're all concerned about the increase of so-called "Christian nationalism" in our communities, the expression of far-right extremism, online hate speech, flags on lamp-posts, public marches, protests outside asylum-seekers hotels: all causing distress and division in our communities. I expect that members of our own *cathedral* family can sometimes feel unsafe, intimidated and threatened in this climate. We need to hear them, support them and pray for them, let them know that they're not alone. We know that the cathedral and the city are rooted in the call to work for reconciliation, where we're encouraged to learn to live with difference and celebrate diversity. We know that our faith carries a message of God's love for all people. We know that we should be working for our communities to be places where everyone can flourish and not live in fear. It's not about rejecting our identity but about having pride in a shared identity, with everyone who calls this country home, grounded in neighbourhood and unconditional charity. God calls us all to live with courage, trust and hope - to be a blessing to others.

But let's see where Jesus' position on identifying with the Jews, has left the Canaanite woman. He quotes a traditional proverb that the Jews commonly applied to the pagan Gentiles. Frankly, it was offensive – likening her to a dog - it was an insult. But the woman refuses to accept that this is the end of the conversation. She doesn't give up or storm off in a rage – which so many of us are tempted to do when we fundamentally disagree with something someone else has said.

Instead, she accepts the proverb about the dogs as applying to her. But she still refuses to accept that there can be no generosity shown to her and her daughter

as she pleads for a small share of God's grace that she has heard proclaimed by Jesus. She claims some part of that universality of God's abundance for her daughter. Due to her courage and persistence, Jesus gives in to her vision of grace and abundance.

Do we have a picture here of Jesus struggling between being true to God's mercy and generosity - and his human instincts around maintaining boundaries and barriers? Perhaps the woman causes Jesus to see that the abundant mercy of God *cannot* be contained within the limits of Israel. Perhaps when he sees the magnitude of her faith, he is willing to be changed by it, to respond to it. We can't be certain that Jesus enlarges his mission because of his encounter with this woman but certainly from this point onwards in Matthew's Gospel, we see Jesus moving beyond this boundary until, after his death and resurrection, he commissions his disciples "to go and make disciples of all nations." God had always intended that the people of Israel would be the ones he chose to spread the Good News of his Kingdom. They would hear the message first, they would fulfil God's purpose for which they existed, his promised new life would come through Israel. But we know now that Jesus' teaching and healing is for all people and cannot be limited by our borders and barriers. God's love cannot be contained or reduced by the limits we impose. Some of us may feel uncomfortable with the idea that Jesus changed his mind, that he learned something from this woman. But if Jesus is truly human, then learning something from it is not a failing – it is part of the miracle. This is not about Jesus taking the initiative for a mission to the Gentiles but a Gentile woman taking the initiative to encounter Jesus.

The Canaanite woman does not simply demonstrate faith. She reminds Jesus, his disciples – and us – that there is enough bread for everyone. It is this Gentile woman's vision which expands our understanding of the nature of God and his purposes for creation and humanity. This woman is subversive, resisting human oppression and barriers of class, gender and race. It is she who is aware of the prejudice and bigotry around her. She refuses to acquiesce when she meets opposition. It is she who stands her ground.

And is this a message for us today, as we see people, who are perceived as outsiders, humiliated, abused, even killed on our streets? Is it a message for us to take action as we see victims fleeing from places of terror, persecution and death, putting themselves at the mercy of people-traffickers and then insulted, ill-treated and ostracised when they reach our shores? Do we see them as our priority – to share with them the generous grace and love of God? Can we stand our ground when all around us are displaying prejudice, bigotry and ignorance?

Like this Gentile woman, we too must resist attitudes that limit or exclude others and we should never accept what is given to us as truth if that truth does not allow everyone to flourish, to join in, to know abundance and to share in the feast where none go hungry.

Let's end by recalling the opening verses from Isaiah that we heard – "Maintain justice and do what is right, for soon my salvation will come..... Thus says the Lord God who gathers the outcasts of Israel, I will gather others to them besides those already gathered." Jesus fulfils this prophesy – he comes to gather the outcasts, to break down the barriers of race and religion, to share God's grace. Let us do likewise.