

Sermon on Sunday 16 August by Geoff Oates, Lay Reader

Gospel: Matthew 15:21-28

Jesus left that place and went away to the district of Tyre and Sidon. Just then a Canaanite woman from that region came out and started shouting, 'Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon.' But he did not answer her at all. And his disciples came and urged him, saying, 'Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us.' He answered, 'I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.'

But she came and knelt before him, saying, 'Lord, help me.' He answered, 'It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs.' She said, 'Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table.' Then Jesus answered her, 'Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.' And her daughter was healed instantly.

Matthew 15 v 26: Jesus answered: 'It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs.'

Matthew gives us a tricky little incident to ponder this morning,

For his comment to an obviously distressed, foreign woman, Jesus could easily have got himself logged for a non-crime hate incident. It's really not appropriate to compare people to dogs. It certainly wasn't in Jesus' time. The Jews of the age were very clear in dividing the animal kingdom up into 'clean' and 'unclean' and dogs were firmly in the 'unclean' camp – things to be avoided. We don't expect language like this from Jesus. At least the story has a happy ending.

I see three significant things happening in this handful of verses:

First - Jesus goes somewhere new

Secondly- Jesus changes his mind

Thirdly - a woman, or a girl, is healed.

Let's start with somewhere new:

Jesus and his Disciples have gone to the region of Tyre and Sidon. Where will you find Tyre and Sidon today? On the coast of southern Lebanon, under the modern names of Sour and Saida

That's at least 3 days walk from Jesus' base at Capernaum, and it's the first time in Matthew's Gospel that Jesus has strayed away from his Galilean homeland. In those times it belonged to the Roman province of Syria, and the Jewish population was at best a minority. So it's a place you might expect to meet a foreigner. It is frontier territory. Historically relations between the people either side of that border were

not friendly. They still aren't. Jesus couldn't make that walk from Galilee to Tyre today. It's a war zone.

The second point - Jesus changes his mind:

At first Jesus simply ignores the woman. The first response to her comes from the Disciples. 'Send her away Lord, we've got nothing to do with her'. Jesus consults with his Jewish followers, and he finds a safe, orthodox argument to justify his response. 'My Father has sent me to his own people, I shouldn't be wasting my resources on her.'

But the woman doesn't go away. She confronts Jesus face to face. She doesn't respond to his rejection with anger. Instead she engages politely with his rather insensitive metaphor and turns it against him. 'Sir, if I'm a dog, just give me the scraps off the table. That's enough for me and my daughter.'

We have to admire her! But I also love the way Jesus responds. There's no big fuss, just a blunt acknowledgment that she has the better argument. And Jesus repents. Not in the sense of apologising, that's not what 'repent' means. He changes his mind, abandons his previous, orthodox position, and acts accordingly. Orthodox views have a way of melting away when we meet real people, don't they?

It is Jesus who comes out of this encounter a wiser man. We can easily get a picture of Jesus as a man who walks the journey of life in full control of every situation and always certain of the next step he will take. It's St John's Gospel that often reinforces that view. Passages like this from Matthew remind us that Jesus himself was also on a journey of discovery through the Gospel narrative. And that makes him far more attractive for me. Because that is how I walk my life, learning as I go, having to change my mind, change my course, and happy to work out where I'm going when I get there.

Finally the third point: A girl is healed – or perhaps a woman, we are not told the age of the daughter. The woman's daughter could have had little ground for hope, without the assertive faith of her mother in the generous power of a foreign God she barely knew. There is a happy ending. That's what is really important in this story. Not the theology, not the geography, but a healed human being

So what might all this have to say to us?

Where might our Tyre and Sidon be? Is God calling us to make at least occasional forays away from our heartland to places where we will meet the unfamiliar, the exotic, even the hostile? That journey will probably not need to be a geographical one. Who are our Canaanites? There are hundreds of people in our parish who feel no connection to the God that we know.

People who are socially, culturally far removed from our patterns of piety and fellowship. People who, if we get their attention, may challenge us, disagree with us, even blame us for their troubles, but Jesus still calls us to engage with them. They

too need healing. But it's not just about what we can offer them through the grace of our God. They will have lessons to teach us, lessons that might change us, and make us wiser servants of our God.

The biggest frontier I crossed was my engagement with refugee ministry during my years in Germany. German church charities asked the English-speaking expat Anglican and Methodist churches were asked by for help with the many English speaking African refugees in the city. It began quite simply, with collecting and distributing English books and magazines and winter clothing. What we somehow hadn't expected was that these people, many of them practising Christians, would start coming to our Churches! And that meant change.

There were some among us who did not like this. No, they said, these are Canaanites, we haven't the resources to handle this. We're happy doing our own thing together like we do back home. But we did welcome them, and our churches changed from comfortable rather introspective, mainly white expat clubs into vibrant multicultural, multi-denominational hubs of pastoral ministry. We changed, and became better servants of our God.

It needn't be so dramatic. Right now I'm exploring the frontiers between generations, between my life's experience of faith and that of my son and daughter in law as they face the challenges of work, mortgages, student debt and impending parenthood. It feels like a foreign land to me. I expect to learn and change. Some frontiers are very close to home.

Let me mention one last frontier. One that is the closest of all. How many people sit in our Churches week by week, but still feel themselves to be outsiders, Canaanites, subtly excluded from the fullness of fellowship by their own guilts and fears, or by the thoughtlessness of others, or by the sheer burden of cares in their life.

Perhaps all of us feel sometimes like the Canaanite, the dog denied even the scraps under the table? If you do, then take heart from this woman's tale that Matthew brings us. Make your claim boldly on Jesus, as she did. You have a right to belong. Things can change. Healing happens. That is what the story is really about. That is what the whole Gospel message is really about.

Amen.