

## Sunday Sermon - 16.08.20

11th Sunday after Pentecost

Delivered by Rev'd Stephen Monsiegnur at St Paul's

*Matthew 15:21-28 New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)*

*21 Leaving that place, Jesus withdrew to the region of Tyre and Sidon. 22 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.' 23 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.' 24 He answered, 'I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel.' 25 The woman came and knelt before him. 'Lord, help me!' she said. 26 He replied, 'It is not right to take the children's bread and toss it to the dogs.' 27 'Yes it is, Lord,' she said. 'Even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table.' 28 Then Jesus said to her, 'Woman, you have great faith! Your request is granted.' And her daughter was healed at that moment.*

The Canaanite woman described by Matthew (15:22) is possibly the same woman also referred to by Mark (7:26) as the Syrophenician woman. In either case while the actual identity of the woman is unknown we are lead to believe by Matthew verses 21-22, that she is from the region of Tyre and Sidon. Interestingly, scholars considering the writings of Josephus, suggest that Jesus even being present in this region at the time was odd given the Canaanites were firstly Gentiles, and more so descendants of Israel's ancient enemies.

What we can be sure of is that the Canaanite woman was a mother in pain forced to watch her daughter suffer and Jesus (not surprisingly given he is a Jewish man) initial response was not promising as he appears to ignore her. The disciples even urged Him to "Send her away", However, despite this and all other reasons an interaction between this woman and Jesus is highly unlikely this woman persists.

What is going on?

It is no accident that Matthew precedes this passage with the theme in verse 15-20 where Jesus clarifies the point that it is the condition of the soul or heart that defiles or saves a person. In other words it is not the external factors but the true personal intentionality, or authenticity of the individual that defines their action as sin or not.

The request from the disciples "Send her away, for she cries out after us." Might well imply, "Send her away by giving her what she wants." The disciples probably in the normal social context regarded this woman as less deserving given she was a gentile and so they just wanted her to go away and the easiest way was for Jesus to fix her problem. But to do so for this reason

would be unauthentic, one could say and abuse of Jesus authority and power by the disciples simply for their own benefit.

Eventually Jesus makes quite clear the point of His mission as he responds, "I was not sent except to the lost sheep of the house of Israel". Jesus is pointing out the difference in racial descendants' and thus highlighting the nature of entitlement of salvation. For the Jews are Gods chosen race while gentiles, like her, were not. We are not told the tone of Jesus, was he serious and being racially discriminating or was there a lighter sense as if he were like a parent, challenging a child to consider alternatives? We do not know. I suspect the later. Jesus is pushing for something more from the woman.

Imagine her frustration. How many of us who as baptised Christians, knowing Jesus would be considering the effort futile?

This woman, no more than any of us has control over her racial heritage. However she does have control over her depth of faith and authenticity. With increased dedication she knelt before Jesus not praying, 'Lord, help my daughter;' but, 'Lord, help me.'"

As Jesus continuing this degrading of the woman adds, 'It is not right to take the children's bread and toss it to the dogs.' (The reference to dogs is significant given its persistence and commonality as a degrading term in many cultures including that of the Israelites, Jesus would know this well) The woman does not challenge Jesus even when he compares her to a dog.

Rather the woman responds with faith and wisdom understanding that Jesus ministry focus the focus is not only to the Jews – although they have a special place in God's redemptive plan- it is also to non-Jews, the gentiles; And she declares her lowliness before Jesus as Lord.

'Yes it is, Lord,' she said. 'Even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table.' This woman of faith does not demand, even to be seen as a child, but only to be blessed as a dog.

It was as if the woman said, "I'm not asking for the portion that belongs to the children, just the crumbs that they don't want." In the flow of Matthew's gospel, there is a growing theme that the Jewish religious establishment did not want to receive the message of Jesus.

Why is this significant?

Simply, Jesus is pointing out the just being a Jew is not enough for salvation. Further, being a gentile does not exclude anyone from the hope of salvation. This woman does not battle with that truth at all, she does not raise any question about it; she wisely waives it, and she just goes on praying, 'Lord, help me! Lord, have mercy upon me!'

How often do we as Christians take for granted this right to salvation, as if we no longer need to rely on, or can dictate to Jesus?

Then something Jesus never does to another person, Looking at the woman Jesus said 'Woman, you have great faith! . . .' Now while Jesus did compliment the great faith of the

Roman centurion who asked for his servant to be healed (Matthew 8:10), he did not say it directly to him, rather Jesus was speaking to the crowd. It is worth noting though that the only people to receive such acclaim are both Gentiles. Never was it given to a Jew.

Could Jesus make the same acclaim to each of us?

Today's Gospel is a message that calls us to reflect again on our standing with God as reflected in the way we live our lives. As I mentioned at the start of the sermon, this Canaanite woman was a mother in pain, initially ignored by the person her faith told her could help, a person degraded both by her actions and Jesus, yet she dug deeper, each time more convinced of belief that Jesus would bless her.

The Jewish authorities knew the law, the prophecies and so on, yet they rejected Jesus, They were self-entitled believing that the messiah would naturally turn to them for support, not mix with outcasts and gentiles. As a result they were unable to know Jesus as the Canaanite woman did, or understand why?

Faith in Jesus is essential just as faith is a part of most human relationships. Where absolute knowledge or truth exist faith is not required, but that is not the condition or context of our human relationships. Great faith, is special and something we are all called to have in Jesus, to express in the way we live, the way we treat others especially those who make us uncomfortable.

Great faith is measured not solely by how we feel but by what it costs. With faith comes risk. The Canaanite women risked embarrassment among other things but she recognised the need and advantage of faith.

How is your faith?

How is your faith expressed?

Is your faith given enough expression?

Do others see your faith in the way you conduct yourself?

At what point does your faith collapse?

These are challenging and if faced authentically, confronting questions, but they are the questions we must explore if we like the Canaanite woman, are going to be able to know confidence when our faith is threatened.