

## Talk for 2020-08-16

*Matthew 15: 21-28*

Today's story is a quick little tale, an aside in Jesus's mission in Jewish Galilee and Judea. He went on a trip to the area around Tyre and Sidon, which is quite a long way – around 100 miles from Capernaum, here He set off from. So, a quick tale but not a quick trip! And the only story we have from this trip, the only idea of its purpose, is this story about a Canaanite woman who Jesus didn't even want to help.

Reading between the lines, it's clear that this woman was persistent – even a nuisance! She asked for help, shouting in the street, and Jesus ignored her. She continued shouting and begging. Even after Jesus has gone elsewhere, perhaps into a house, the disciples feel they have to keep her away from Him, and keep refusing to take her request for healing to Jesus.

But even the disciples reach the end of their tether, and in the end they ask Jesus to send her away Himself. Remember, He's ignored her completely to this point, and they think that only His actual refusal will get rid of her.

And Jesus complies: He says, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel," which very clearly means that He wasn't sent to the likes of her! Even this doesn't put her off, though. She gets into the house with Jesus somehow, gets through the crowd that was surely there and past the disciples who definitely know who she is by now and are on the lookout! She kneels before Jesus and pleads her case again.

Jesus again directly refuses her, and in insulting terms! She's a dog, he says, and there are children he should be focusing on.

This is one of the most amazing moments in this story, though. The woman accepts this insult, but turns it around in a reply that seems instantly to win Jesus's heart, for He straight away grants her request and heals her daughter.

This reply of hers, that "even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table," is fantastic. It's an off-the-cuff, immediate response, but it's amazingly direct and insightful. It's a rabbinic response – even a Christ-like response.

It's the sort of response that we typically see Jesus deploy when He's faced by questioning from the leaders of His day, by the Pharisees, the Sadducees, Herod's men. And now this weapon, this use of intelligence, insight and wisdom, is turned on Him by a foreign woman.

This nameless woman is brilliant, possibly the clearest thinker other than Jesus we see in any of the Gospels. Even though Jesus praises her for her faith, it's clearly her clarity of thought and purpose that really wins her the healing she wanted. Faith pushes her, but her natural talents are what steer her and get her over the line.

This is typically where sermons on this passage end: persistence and faith mean that Jesus answers her prayer. But this is to miss something vitally important in this story: we're talking about a Canaanite woman here.

She's a woman; she's a foreigner; she's a Canaanite. She's intelligent; she's determined; she's the mother of a sick daughter.

She's an outsider to Jesus and the disciples, unworthy, beneath their notice. She's like a dog under the table, barely tolerated and, at best, perhaps tossed a few scraps.

*That's* what this story is about – the outsider challenging religious authority, challenging (we believe) God Himself, and winning.

It can be hard to see across the distances of history to understand how people used to feel about each other but, in this case, it's not too hard.

She's a woman, that's easy to see. And she's just 'a woman' – we don't learn her name, her position in local society, even her age. She could be anything from late teens to her thirties. She could be rich or poor, influential or outcast. All we know is that she's 'a woman.'

Even now, even here in the UK, we know women are disadvantaged by society. Women do most of the unpaid work even now in our country. They work longer hours for less pay. They suffer more ill health, are expected to care for children and parents and neighbours at the expense of their own health and career. They're harassed and assaulted. They

suffer domestic violence and rape, and see no justice, because they're 'just women'.

So, a woman confronting a visiting religious leader and celebrity and demanding healing: that takes guts.

And she's not a typical woman. She's determined, persistent and intelligent. Or, to use words more likely to be applied to a woman: she's abrasive, pushy and opinionated.

She doesn't fit into the place that society has prepared for her: kind and quiet, meek and submissive. She knows that she needs something, knows where the solution may lie, and goes after it.

Even more than this, she's a Canaanite. That's harder for us to understand. The Jews had successfully invaded Canaan more than a thousand years before Jesus's day, and the relationship hadn't got a lot better in that time.

But we can think about it like this. Imagine the relationship between a politician in Israel now and a Palestinian from occupied Gaza.

Imagine the relationship between a British TV journalist this week, on a chartered yacht in the English Channel, looking down on Syrian refugees crammed into a tiny dinghy.

Imagine the relationship between a Trumpington resident and a Traveller family parking up on the King George playing field, outside the bowling club.

We like creating Outsiders. We like putting people into a category where they're like dogs under the table to us, beneath our attention and undeserving of human respect.

In this story, Jesus is confronted by an outsider, by someone who crossed boundaries to reach Him and who perhaps challenged His own assumptions. She reaches out, and is answered.

God reaches beyond the boundaries that God Himself set, because God's love requires it.

Although God chose the people of Israel as Their own, although Jesus was born a Jew and had a mission and a purpose that were completely encompassed by His Jewish identity, God couldn't be limited by that because God ultimately loves all of Their creation.

Although we think we know the boundaries of God's love and care, although we think we know who are God's chosen people, one of the few certainties in life is that God will reach beyond our boundaries.

Whatever boundary, whatever limit we place on God's love, we're wrong. God will always reach further, will always find a way to heal the outsider, to bring them into God's Kingdom.

In the end, then, this Canaanite woman has her prayer answered despite being an outsider, despite being trouble, despite being demanding. Her daughter is healed because her mother is faithful, is loving, and keeps her attention fixed on God.

*And* because God has no limits or boundaries.

The Canaanite woman doesn't know much about this God. She doesn't understand much, if any, of Jesus's teachings. But she knows that her answers are here, in the person of Jesus. She fixes her eyes on Jesus and pursues him, and He gives her the answer she wanted, the answer she needed.

He praises her and includes her in His Kingdom. That's all we know, and all we need to know.

Because we're outsiders, too, and we need to hear this message: Jesus isn't just for the children of Israel. That's where God's Kingdom started, but it's burst out into the whole world.

If we pursue Jesus, if we ask, if we have faith, we can be part of that Kingdom and receive healing for ourselves and our people.

It's only us who have limits and boundaries, not God.