

The Canaanite woman's faith

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Pentecost + 11a – Matthew 15 21-28

A sick child gets healed in an instant. But before that joyful instant, there are some shocking moments. If you found the story shocking, you're not alone. It's so unlike the Jesus we think we know. What's happened to him? Actually quite a lot; there's been the feeding of the 5000, yet another fight with religious leaders and again Jesus withdraws to take refuge from the crowds and critics. This time, he goes way up north in the region of Tyre and Sidon, in Lebanon. But his last debate with the Pharisees about who's an insider and who's not – that debate won't get left behind.

No sooner does Jesus escape the Pharisees than he's being hounded by a foreigner – a local woman who cries out to him constantly that her daughter's being tormented by a demon. A Canaanite woman. Canaanite civilization was the one Joshua meant to wipe out 1500 years earlier. But Joshua didn't succeed; Canaan still had a sophisticated artistic, commercial and religious life in the time of Jesus. There was a big temple in Sidon dedicated to the Canaanite god Eshmun, a god of healing. But this woman doesn't go to Eshmun for her daughter's healing; she goes to Jesus.

She appears out of nowhere, crying out loudly and continuously that her daughter is tormented by a demon. She uses words familiar to us; *eleison-me Kyrie* – have mercy on me Lord. She calls Jesus 'Son of David'. She knows who this exhausted traveller really is. But Jesus's response shocks us. He meets her anguished cries with silence. Then, musing to himself, or to his disciples, he mutters that his mission was only to the 'lost sheep of the House of Israel'. That's what he'd taught his disciples.^{cf 10:5-6} But the woman's cries continue. She

confronts him; blocks his path – ²⁵ *she came and knelt before him, saying, 'Lord, help me.'* ²⁶ *He answered, 'It's not fair to take the children's food and throw it [out] to the pet dogs.'*

This shocks me. It's insulting; racist; it devalues the woman's humanity. It goes against all I proclaim Jesus to be. But then something unexpectedly cross-cultural happens. And it bridges the gulf between them. She accepts the insult – and it *is* an insult. She agrees with Jesus, but then uses his own dog image to contradict him.

Yes, Lord, yet even the pet dogs eat the crumbs that fall from the master's table. Cross cultural? Jewish households of the time didn't allow dogs inside. So even though the word Jesus uses is the one for *pet* dogs, not wild dogs, he's saying that for him, taking a gift he's brought for Israel and giving it to a foreigner would be like flinging it out the window. But in this woman's community, pet dogs *did* come inside. They'd be near the table, ready for any scraps that came their way. (Contrasts like this still between Middle Eastern communities) This woman doesn't see herself asking for the children's bread; she's just desperate for any crumbs that may fall. For her child's sake, she accepts the insult, and Jesus is won over; *Woman, your faith is great. Let it be to you as you wish.* Her daughter was healed from that hour.

She's audacious and unflinching, and Jesus is won over by her unshakable faithfulness to her child, and her belief in him. *Woman, your faith is great. Let it be to you as you wish. And her daughter was healed from that hour.*

This woman teaches us about faith. Faith doesn't just mean belief in the way we think of it. The Old English word *beleven* meant 'to love'. So the belief aspect of faith is not *belief in*, but *commitment to*. It's an expression of trust; of faithfulness, of love. This woman's love for her daughter, and her trust in Jesus took him part of the way from local mission

to world mission. He would only fully declare himself as Messiah to the whole world, not just Israel, after his resurrection. ^{28.16-20} She sensed the mercy of the Son of David. Somehow she knew that the heart of the mission of Jesus was not about who's in or out; it was about grace; that ultimately, all are welcome in. That's what Jesus came for, and I wonder if she helped him realise that.

Matthew's community was based in this area, and this story flagged their mission as one to *outsiders*. It tells us about our mission too. Those unlooked for moments of distraction from the main game, when our mission seems to be hijacked by peripheral things and people – those very moments can be moments of insight which we must seize. We must also learn that peripheral people are not peripheral at all. We are all family. Jesus heard one call; he changed; he responded – and so must we. Amen