

Pentecost 10 – St Aidan’s 9am – 17th August 2014
Sermon by Rev David Thiem

Reading: Matthew 15:21-28
Theme: “The faith of the Canaanite woman”

Introduction

The larger context of the Canaanite woman’s plea to Jesus and the healing of her daughter is framed by the feeding of the 5,000 and 4,000 in Matt 14:15-21 & 15:32-39. Within that frame there is another, narrower context formed by healings done by Jesus near the Sea of Galilee in Matthew 14:34-36 & 15:29-31. Immediately preceding Jesus’ dialogue with the woman is the teaching section in Matthew 15:1-20 dealing with the misuse of tradition versus obedience to the commandment of God and lessons on things that defile a person. All of these passages interact. Clearly relevant is the setting. The healings done in Galilee would be primarily, if not entirely, among Jewish people, while the encounter with the Canaanite woman is quite deliberately set in a foreign locality, in the region of Tyre and Sidon which was on the Mediterranean coast or close to it. It is the only mention of a Canaanite in the Gospels and one of only a couple of encounters recorded of Jesus with non-Jews. Among the things that might be thought to defile a Jewish person in this era was close contact with a foreigner and particularly if that person was a woman and you were in public. We see this with Jesus’ discourse with the ‘woman at the well’ in John 4 and the disciples’ amazement that Jesus talked to her. However Jesus has just taught his disciples that only what proceeds from the heart can defile. He does not directly deal with the question of contact with foreigners - much less with extending the ministry of the kingdom of heaven to them. What will Jesus do?

The account – Matthew 15:21-28

The first thing we note is that the woman takes the initiative and calls out to Jesus:

“Lord, Son of David, have mercy on me. My daughter is suffering terribly from demon- possession.” Vs 23b

She wasn’t just calling out, she was ‘crying out’ wanting help, wanting Jesus’ attention and imploring him to do the healing miracle. She calls him ‘Lord’ (‘kyrios’ in the Greek), which has the connotations of faith along with the term ‘Son of David’ which shows Jesus’ royal heritage within the Jewish people.

Matthew has Jesus remain silent, heightening the tension and perhaps the sense of question, in his mind and the hearers as to what he would do. The disciples urge him to send her away. Jesus answers the disciples by saying: **“I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel.”** vs 24

This seems harsh, exclusive and not what you would think of Jesus. Certainly this was Jesus’ ministry initially that was widened later. Possibly here we have the beginnings of teaching the disciples that the time is coming to see his ministry as broader than to the Jews.

The Canaanite woman continues to implore Jesus – ‘Lord, help me,’ (vs25) kneeling before him in servitude.

Then comes what appears to be incredibly harsh words from Jesus: “***It is not right to take the children’s bread and toss it to their dogs.***” vs 26

Attempts have been made to try to rescue Jesus from the force and tenor of these words. However, it is difficult to interpret these words in any other manner than to see Jesus as saying the Jews have first opportunity at being God’s people and you are definitely secondary!

The Canaanite woman is amazing. The insult simply seems to ‘flow over her’ and she retorts to Jesus:

“Yes Lord, but even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master’s table.”

vs 27

She appears to take no offence at Jesus’ words but rather says even the ‘left-overs’ will be enough to heal her daughter.

With her response, it appears to change Jesus’ attitude to her and her request.

“Woman, you have great faith. Your request is granted” vs 28

It appears the woman’s tenacity, faith, come-backs to Jesus all had an impact on him. From a distance, without any touching, immediately, the woman’s daughter was healed.

How do we deal with this miracle account?

A few comments that I make:

- Firstly, no-one is beyond the bounds of God, whatever we may say or do or think
- Secondly, we need to bring our requests to God and let it be known what they are
- Thirdly, we need to have a faith expectation that God will hear and heal in the way that is fitting – not necessarily in the way we want
- Fourthly, we are encouraged to be ‘in the face’ of God, not with our anger but with the boldness of our requests, expecting an outcome

So is this teaching the disciples and us faith, compassion, consistency and intrusiveness in our approach towards God in prayer, service and requests? Is it teaching us to throw ourselves on God’s mercy?

I believe it is teaching us compassion which grows by sharing life with those who were once strangers; it teaches spiritual vision by participating in the ever-expanding family of God. I continue to grow spiritually by those I share with who are on the fringes of the church, those who have other experiences of Christ and through experiencing God in the lives of others often in unexpected situations. Here we have such an account, all are enriched through this encounter and the outcaste is the catalyst for that spiritual growth.

Praise be to God for this word of hope for all today. Amen!