

## Sunday 20<sup>th</sup> August 2023 – Rev Alison Bruton

Reading: Matthew 15: 21-28

When you read a story from the Bible, I wonder whether you find yourself asking the question why? Looking at our Gospel reading today I can't help but ask all sorts of questions, not all of which I have yet found the answers to: why did Jesus decide to travel from where he had been in Gennesaret to Tyre, in total a journey of around 35 miles, on foot, taking at least 7 hours not including any stops for rest and to eat and drink? After the encounter with the Canaanite woman, why did Jesus then travel back to the Sea of Galilee, according to the account in Mark's Gospel, via Sidon, another 15 miles further up the coast, and then via Decapolis, adding around 11-12 hours to their journey? Did Jesus just fancy a very long stroll? Perhaps he, like Rev Phil, likes a good long walk? I think if I had been one of the disciples I might have been thinking, if not saying repeatedly 'are we there yet?'

The reason why Jesus took his disciples on this journey into Gentile territory isn't at all clear, but I like to think that the encounter he had with the Canaanite woman was so significant that it made the miles of walking worthwhile.

So, what was so significant about this encounter? Well, the woman would certainly have been regarded as an outsider by his Jewish entourage, after all Jesus was a Jewish Rabbi, so a meeting with such a woman would have been fraught with all sorts of purity taboos...interesting then that this event is preceded in Matthew's Gospel by Jesus teaching the crowd about what really causes impurity.

This woman was a Canaanite, a Gentile and, to state the obvious, a female. Yet, Jesus travelled a long way and overcame social and religious barriers in order to meet with her; he was willing to cross over into an adjacent territory so he could have a real encounter which would transform them both.

Perhaps this might make us think of how we might move outside our comfort zone with the aim of encountering those who are considered as outsiders in our society? Recently I was delighted to speak with Nadia Harushimina after a morning service. She was an asylum seeker from Burundi and had been welcomed by the community here at Christ Church having been referred in our direction by the Mothers' Union; I heard of how our church family had supported her through to graduating as a nurse. We should continually be on the lookout for further opportunities such as this amongst those on the margins who we might come across, or even perhaps, put ourselves into places where we might more readily come across people to whom we can bring God's transformative love, just as Jesus did in our Gospel reading.

Coming back to our text, let's take a look at what happens when the woman appears and starts to shout at Jesus. But before we do, we need to recognise here that our Gospel writer was very much approaching this episode from a Jewish perspective which is quite a challenge for us here who might find this viewpoint hard to appreciate. The woman calls Jesus 'Son of David' so clearly, she recognises his Jewish credentials and is speaking respectfully, and yet Jesus does not answer her. I do wonder whyever not, but let us continue. At this point the disciples intervene and ask Jesus to send her away; given how tired they must have been after their long journey on foot it isn't perhaps too surprising that

they were pretty grumpy and wanted to get rid of this annoying woman rather than respond to her request for help. I do have sympathy for them, I suspect they wanted to rest and find something to eat; I tend to be grumpy when I'm tired and hungry.

But the woman's persistence pays off and Jesus eventually responds, saying that he was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel, that is to the Jews. At this point we might well want to say, 'Well what about us Lord, we're not Jewish?' But if we look a bit more closely in Matthew's Gospel, we see some earlier glimpses of God's all-inclusive intentions in the story of the Magi in Chapter 2 and of the Centurion (who asked Jesus to heal his servant and who Jesus commended for his great faith) in Chapter 8. But it is only after the crucifixion and resurrection that we see the door being thrown fully open to the non-Jewish world in the Great Commission in Matthew 28:19 'Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit'.

Returning to our text; this poor woman who had come to Jesus pleading for help had been faced by this somewhat dismissive response. What does she do? Does she storm off in a huff at what had been said? Absolutely not, she perseveres with her request in the knowledge that Jesus is the only one who could do for her what she so desperately needs. She kneels before Jesus and is not too proud to do so.

What Jesus says next is quite tough to hear, he uses a parable like illustration in which Gentiles are likened to the dogs under the table who are seeking to be given food that is for the family that is eating. The word 'dogs' could more readily be translated as puppies and carries more the image of a loved household pet, but even so this is not the kind of thing we would normally expect to hear from Jesus. Yet the woman does not take offence, as I think I would have done in the same position; she responds with what might be seen as a witty retort indicating that even a scrap is better than nothing and that even the dogs have a place within the household. What the woman appears to be doing here is challenging Jesus to extend his mission beyond Israel to a Canaanite, an ancient enemy for the Jews.

Faced with this response what does Jesus do? He commends her faith and heals her daughter by a spoken word. Jesus' perspective seems to have changed and he sees this woman as a child of God whose great faith and persistence had brought about healing for her daughter.

This figure of the Canaanite woman should encourage us not only to pray for but also to speak out strongly and persistently on behalf of those in need. And just as Jesus moved from seeing this woman as an outsider to being one to whom salvation is fully extended, so should we regard those we come across whose lifestyle and behaviour might challenge our expectation of normality.

Amen