

THE CAANANITE WOMAN

Matthew 15:21-28

This little story called the Canaanite Woman in our reading from Matthew's gospel is also referred to by Mark as the Syro-Phoenician Woman (Mark 7:24-30). The two descriptions are really trying to refer to the same thing, the woman was a gentile woman of Canaanite ethnic origin from the region of Tyre and Sidon. These were the main Canaanite port towns in the region generally referred to as Phoenicia. When the Israelites had invaded the Promised Land, the Canaanites inhabited the coastal region of Israel including the area of Tyre and Sidon. Sidon was about 25 miles North of Tyre and Tyre was itself about 25 miles from Jesus's usual haunts in Galilee. The Canaanites were a cultured race and the first known alphabet comes from Canaanites working for the Egyptians in the mines of Sinai around 3,000 BC. However they were a pagan people who focussed on a veneration of the dead in the form of household gods and goddesses and also worshipped many other gods – for example Baal and Asherah. Since the Jews came into the Promised Land a thousand years before Jesus's time the Jews and the Canaanites had been bitter enemies.

In our reading, Jesus has apparently withdrawn to a remote area, Matthew never says that Jesus entered the pagan cities of Tyre and Sidon or even sought contact with the local people. This isn't a mission to the gentiles, it's more in the nature of a retreat. In this retreat he somehow meets the Canaanite woman, who has come out to seek him – he doesn't go to a gentile house. She clearly has some prior knowledge of Jesus and who he is and reaches out to him across the twin divides of race and gender – she's both a gentile and a woman and rabbis didn't talk to either women or gentiles.

The story deals with the Canaanite woman asking for a healing for her daughter – although it's interesting that she doesn't say have mercy on my *daughter*, but rather have mercy on *me*. The mother was clearly in pain and distress. It's one of very few stories of Jesus providing healing to non-Jews – indeed I can only think of two others, the healing of the servant of the centurion in (Matthew 8:5-13) and the exorcism performed by Jesus in the Decapolis (Matthew 8:28-34). Of course, Jesus did also provide miraculous provision to non-Jews in the feeding of the four thousand (Matthew 15:29-38) – but that wasn't a healing. At first sight the gentile issue seems to present a problem, because Jesus is initially reluctant to grant The Canaanite woman's daughter a healing even though he displayed no similar reluctance to heal the centurion's servant.

The woman wasn't in any way demanding a reward for merit, she was asking for grace. She addresses Jesus very respectfully as 'Lord' and 'Son of David'. She asks for a healing for her daughter, although she doesn't tell us how old her daughter is, she says her daughter is terribly demon possessed. She's saying that her daughter is in a bad state.

The disciples wanted to send this woman away, and it's clear that they regarded her as a nuisance – she kept shouting after them. She's persistent. There's an implication that the disciples are asking Jesus to grant the woman's request and so get rid of her.

In v24 Jesus tells the woman that his mission is to the lost sheep of Israel. Jesus never went out into the gentile world, he was addressing the Jews and spent all his time in Galilee and Judea.

The woman humbles herself and kneels before Jesus saying Lord help me – notice that she says help me rather than help my daughter she's suffering.

Jesus's answer to the woman's plea appears harsh, especially when he likens gentiles to dogs – which were unclean animals almost as despised as pigs. Jesus is saying quite strongly that his mission is to Jews and not Gentiles.

The woman accepts what Jesus is saying and agrees with him in her words in v27, but she gives a feisty response. If gentiles are dogs then let them have their due – the crumbs from the table. After all dogs have a right to be fed. She's saying that gentiles have their place too and whilst Jesus's main obligation may be to feed the Jews, the gentiles can eat the scraps that fall from the table.

Jesus then completely reverses his position and applauds the boldness of her refusal to accept defeat. Jesus tells her that her great faith has resulted in him granting the healing she requested – not just a healing for her daughter but a healing for the woman as well, *let it be unto you as you desire*. It's another healing at a distance, just like that of the centurion's servant we spoke of a moment ago. It's interesting that both these healings at a distance, the only ones we know of, both involve gentiles. Perhaps it was to avoid Jesus having to enter a gentile house, but we don't really know.

Many Christians have difficulty with this story (especially Matthew's version), they see Jesus's attitude as being dismissive or downright rude and they don't like him referring to gentiles as dogs – but actually Jesus is just playing hard to get to test the woman's faith. He's setting this woman a tough test not putting her down. Jesus draws out and develops the woman's faith and his strategy works. Apart from the healing of the centurion's servant we've already referred to, this is the only time in Matthew when faith is described as 'great'. Jesus often uses the same strategy of drawing out and developing faith with us. Also Jesus's ultimate mission very much included the gentiles, but his earthly ministry was directed almost exclusively towards the Jews.