

## Passion Sunday March 21<sup>st</sup>: The Canaanite Woman: [Matthew 15:21-28](#):

### 'Woman, you have great faith'



*1<sup>st</sup> century style meal, Nazareth Village*

Today is Passion Sunday when we think particularly about the pain and suffering that Jesus endured on his journey to the cross. Reflecting on how he overcame the dread within as he pleaded to be released from and subsequently accepted the way of suffering and death (Mat 26 v 36-44) reveals much about the love he personified.

In the light of that, what on earth is going on in today's passage? Jesus and his disciples are way up the road when they encounter a local woman in desperate need. But it is not her daughter and at worst has no intention of helping her at all. He responds to her initial cry with silence (v 23) and then moves on to inform her that she is outside the scope of his mission (v 24) and use a racial slur against her (v 26). As Jesus does eventually release her daughter from the evil that has imprisoned her we could, at first reading, understand this encounter as a steep learning curve for him. In the end, in spite of his misgivings, he recognises her faith and responds and in doing so begins to understand that his ministry might have wider ramifications than he had realised up to this point.

The problem with this reading is that, as we saw yesterday, Jesus had already healed the servant of a Roman Centurion (Mat 8 5-13) and if we cross check with Luke's Gospel we will see that, right from the outset, he was risking his life to make the point that he had not come just to save Israel (using the widow in Zarephath and Namaan the Syrian as test cases - Luke 4 v 24-27). It nearly got him killed before he'd even got started (Luke 4 v 28-30).

It may well be that, by a process of elimination; the people who really needed to get shaken out of their racial presuppositions were his disciples. It's almost as if he deliberately gives voice to sullen silence, exclusivist thinking and racial slurs that that are present in their hearts (and given voice by their request to Jesus to get rid of her - v 23) in order to demonstrate how unacceptable they really are.

What Jesus is doing here is shoving this woman's faith under the noses of the disciples as if to say, 'what do you make of that?!' It is not the only example of shock therapy in the Gospels; his declared intention to go to his death in Jerusalem and his request to wash the feet of his disciples spring readily to mind. What seems to be happening here is that Jesus is demonstrating that real faith, the kind of faith that isn't put off by silence, exclusion or racial slurs, is to be found beyond the boundaries of Israel and in people other than those who self-identify as God's chosen people. Lost sheep can through faith be found, loved, helped and healed in Tyre and Sidon just as much as in Galilee or Jerusalem.

Once the disciples have encouraged Jesus to send this troublesome woman packing we don't hear another word from them. They stand silent as this Canaanite woman, who for them was certainly a 'dog' and who represented a society that had a long history of enmity with the people of Israel, gives voice to a deeper faith than they themselves can muster. I wonder what they are thinking.

Prejudices don't have to be at the surface to be real. Those who give voice to their bigotry by going on marches or committing hate crime are not the only ones who feel that way. It's just that most people keep it under wraps. Prejudice is where we judge people not as individuals but according to race, class, age, sexuality, disability or any other category. Yet Christians hold unequivocally to a belief that every human life is sacred because what we all have in common and binds us together as a human family is that we are made in the image of God.

This means that all those who have left their homes and communities to escape war or poverty, those of all races, ethnicities and sexualities, those with disabilities and those of all ages are family. The effect of what the disciples witnessed as Jesus appears to send this outsider back where she came from and then turns everything they have always known to be true on its head by applauding her faith and healing her daughter would have been thought provoking, to say the very least.

We must be aware that similar prejudices and assumptions about people lie deep within our own culture and its morally ambivalent past. An ancestor of mine who was a barrister at Lincoln's Inn for many years spent the last nine years of his life as a senior legal officer in British India, still run at that time (the early nineteenth century) by the East India Company. He was a knight of the realm and, especially as he is not at all typical of my family history, which is mostly peopled by people such as agricultural labourers and bricklayers, it has been interesting to research his life. However my severe doubts about his role as an instrument of empire came to a head when a speech he made following the Third Anglo-Maratha War of 1817-18 which decisively cemented and expanded British rule in India was brought to my attention. The speech, which was to propose a motion congratulating the Governor General on his military success, reflected an unquestioned belief in the superiority of the British race and a consequent justification of a war in which many thousands of Indians were killed.

It was the inability to question his assumptions concerning racial superiority and the fact that this validated military action against people who had not asked the British to be in India in the first place which was most shocking to me. There are uncomfortable questions we all have to ask ourselves about inherited assumptions we might have failed to question and consequent prejudices lurking unacknowledged within. It is also something that churches need to address. The inclusive nature of the good news of Jesus Christ is exactly why Jesus's disciples, standing in awed and uncomfortable silence in front of a foreign woman who had just demonstrated that her faith was more inclusive than theirs, needed to be confronted and challenged.

So if we believe that God sent Jesus to die because he wants everybody to be included, there will be practical implications for the life of the church. For instance we will need to raise awkward questions, as touched on with regard to Mephibosheth, about to what extent people with disabilities are able to fully (with the emphasis firmly on the word *fully*) participate in the life of the church including all leadership roles. In my time in ministry a growing awareness of this issue led to action being taken to introduce such things as induction loops, large print service booklets and ramps enabling people with disabilities to access all areas (bearing in mind that the need to be able to climb steps to, for instance, celebrate or help distribute Holy Communion is exclusory). A fully open and inclusive Christian community is a thing of great beauty. It will reflect the passion of Christ and embody his vision of a kingdom open to the poor, the prisoners, the blind and the oppressed (Luke 4 v 18). The task for the church today is to live out the fundamental truth that

God wants everybody to be included. That's as much a challenge for God's people today as it was for the disciples during their trip up north.

**Questions:** What contemporary attitudes do we see in the reaction of the disciples to the Canaanite woman? How might we address them within ourselves and more widely in the church and in society?

**Prayer:** Lord, thank you for enduring suffering for us and for all. Help us to reflect your passionate love in all we think, say and do. Amen.