

Reflection for Pentecost 12 - 20th August 2023 Year A by Megan Cambridge

In our gospel reading from Matthew 15 we read that Jesus has had yet another “run in” with the Pharisees who had come from Jerusalem to scrutinize His actions and criticize His failure to follow the ceremonial traditions of the elders. He and His disciples then withdrew to the region of Tyre and Sidon, two villages northwest of the Sea of Galilee and the city of Capernaum, where most of Jesus’ ministry takes place. This is near modern-day Syria and Lebanon. It’s important to understand the significance of this location because this is the region that was home to the ancient enemies of Israel, the Canaanites. The Canaanites were the ones that Israel had battled thousands of years ago, going all the way back to Joshua and the Israelites’ entrance into the Promised Land.

From a distance, a Canaanite woman saw, recognised and cried out to Jesus, “Lord, Son of David, have mercy on me! My daughter is suffering terribly from demon-possession.” (Matthew 15: 22) This woman had no business being around Jewish people, be they the Messiah or not. She was Canaanite. They were ancient enemies who wanted nothing to do with each other. Yet, this lady cries out and keeps crying out after Jesus, “Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David!” Kyrie Eleison – ‘Lord have mercy’ – the prayer that rings down through the centuries, chanted by choirs, whispered in hospitals, screamed on battlefields, the cry of a soul in extremis. On this occasion Jesus is silent in the face of it but the woman is undeterred. She recognised that Jesus is special, she recognised that He can help her daughter and she recognised that He was the promised ancestor of King David of Israel. Surprisingly, He did not respond to her at all.

If there was one man whom women should consider to be their greatest ally and champion, that man would be Jesus. Jesus was subversive to patriarchy. He showed great respect to women and included them in His mission and ministry. Often, He praised their faith as greater than His male disciples. Jesus engaged women in theological discussions and protected them from abusive practices so it is hard to understand our Lord’s response to this desperate woman.

With a faith that wouldn’t give up, she kept crying out to Him – to the point that Jesus’ disciples begged Him to “send her away!” When Jesus finally does respond to her He tells her that His ministry is only to the children (lost sheep) of Israel. Jesus’ reply would have been very understandable for the Jewish people who were present, yet, it’s also perplexing for those of us who have seen the compassion of Jesus in other places. Jesus had already done some work among Gentile people including healing the centurion’s servant (Matthew 8.) So, what’s going on? Why is Jesus reluctant to heal this woman’s daughter?

Even this response, just His recognition of her, is enough to embolden her to come closer to Him, throw herself at His feet and beg Him “Lord, help me”(Matthew 15: 25) This woman would not take no for an answer. She was resilient. This was her daughter we are talking about. She is not giving up. She wants Jesus to bring healing and rescue for her daughter.

He then says something to her that seems even more harsh and “off-putting”... He tells her that it is not right for Him to give the blessings that belong to the children of Israel to the dogs that surround them. The precious gift He has brought is for the children of Israel not

for others. With a faith that just won't give up, she tells Him she believes that He has more than enough mercy, grace, love, care, power, help and healing for the children of Israel, for her and for her ailing daughter.

Maybe this exchange is ironic or maybe Jesus is caught with his 'compassion down' and is forced to confront his own, cultural prejudice. Maybe we can't expect Jesus to conform to our ideas and expectations of how He should respond. There is, of course, precedent in the Old Testament for God apparently changing His mind in response to the petitions made to Him. It seems like there is a reversal of roles here and the respected teacher learns from the outsider the need to broaden His ministry to those outside the house of Israel.

Jesus saw her faith, commended her, granted her request and completely healed her daughter "from that very hour." Against all odds, even when it appeared that she was being ignored and even turned away, she trusted, believed and hoped in Jesus. Her tenacious faith kept hanging on to the hope that He would have mercy and help her; and He did. In contrast to Peter's faith in our reading last week, this woman never falters despite the rejection of the disciples and the harsh words of Jesus, she never wavers. In Peter's case his focus wavered. The situation he finds himself in, the waves and the water take over his thinking and his faith, his trust fails him. He too has Jesus right there in front of him but he takes his eyes off him and starts to sink. Jesus at once reaches out his hand, catches Peter and lifts him above the water. And Jesus' next words 'You of little faith, why did you doubt?'



(St Peter's Cathedral, Erie, Pennsylvania)

The woman in our gospel does not give up believing that Jesus can help her and does not lose hope and trust in Jesus. In this miracle it is revealed that the miraculous redeeming power of Jesus, the Son of David, is available for all. Jesus' redemption is not just for the children of Israel, but for everyone.

I'm sure there are times when we are 'at the end of our tether', and just barely hanging on. Maybe a situation at work; or with our health or that of a loved one; maybe our family, or someone near us is in crisis. It might seem, at times, that God is ignoring us, or at least

distant and unapproachable. It is at times such as these, against all odds, that God calls us to trust, believe and hope in Jesus. Our gracious Heavenly Father welcomes all who come to Him by faith. He does know, love, hear and provide for us as He knows is best for us. Chiefly, God shows His mercy, grace and help for all people through the cross of Jesus, through His life-giving sacrifice for our forgiveness and the salvation of the entire world. As we live out our faith through trials and testing, our faith can grow into “A Faith that Won’t Give Up”, that trusts our Savior won’t let go of His promises and carries us safely through this world.

Many of the Jewish people would miss out on the grace of God because they would reject Jesus. Similarly, many Gentiles throughout the following centuries would come to God through faith in Jesus the Messiah.



The Canaanite Woman Michael Cook