

Matthew 15:21-28

Today's gospel reading seems to reveal a different side of Jesus we might not be at all comfortable with. It shows Jesus may not always be the meek and mild character we have been lead to believe. In the passage just before today's reading, Jesus has been embroiled in controversy with the Pharisees and scribes over the issue of 'hand washing'. And despairing of the Jewish leaders and their rituals, Jesus publicly tells the crowd that we are defiled by what we say, rather than just eating with unwashed hands. This really upsets the Pharisees, so much so that even the disciples come over to Jesus and reprimand him for his treatment of the Pharisees and his harsh words. Jesus' outburst must have been really quite insensitive, certainly for the disciples to come over and point it out to him. But rather than take onboard their concerns, Jesus has a go at them for not understanding. He explains we are not defiled by what we eat, by what passes through our bodies. Rather, we are defiled by the thoughts and attitudes of our hearts, as shown through our words and actions. For Jesus the wider issue was the place of rituals and traditions in the life of faith. Jesus was trying to highlight the things that really matter.

Escape

To escape the pressure and further confrontations, Jesus withdraws to Gentile territory, to Tyre and Sidon. This is where we pick up the story. He encounters a Gentile woman and we encounter that very different Jesus - stern, judgemental and, seemingly, uncaring. Again, we are confronted with a side of Jesus we are not familiar with, and one which almost insults our ideal. The words Jesus uses to argue with the Canaanite woman are not ones we expect from his mouth, he would certainly get zero points for his political correctness and it is a troubling encounter to say the least.

This woman who Jesus meets is making a fuss, carrying on, making a disturbance. She is shouting at Jesus and pleading with him. Perhaps with all this disturbance she comes across as being a bit of a nutcase. Jesus tries to ignore her and it is obvious it is all a bit embarrassing because the disciples want to send her away, but she is persistent and we get what seems to be this harsh exchange of words between Jesus and this woman.

"I have been sent only to the lost sheep of the people of Israel", Jesus says. In other words, tough luck lady, you don't qualify for my help because you are a Gentile. But the woman isn't put off and she throws herself at Jesus' feet. By this time we imagine that Jesus

has really had enough because he tops the last insult with the next even more shocking one. *“It isn’t right to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs”*. Woowh, how can Jesus say such a thing? It’s not right for me to heal your daughter because you are nothing more than a dog?? What an insult and an unbelievable thing for Jesus to say. It is certainly not the sort of thing we expect from Jesus and with comments like that, he would certainly be prosecuted for Racial Incitement under today’s laws. Those kind of comments shouldn’t come from a man who preaches about love, compassion, fairness and as we have been thinking about over the past few weeks, inclusivity.

Insensitive

Sometimes we can all fall foul to being insensitive, I know it is one of my greatest personal failings and it has got me in trouble in the past. For some reason people expect vicars to be extra aware of the sensitivities of others. Perhaps the expectation comes from those 'Christ-like' qualities that clergy somehow happen to magically acquire during ordination. I know I have changed, but I also know that God has still got plenty of work to do and perhaps being 'Christ like' doesn't always mean you have to be meek and mild, as we seem to imagine they are Jesus' main characteristics. If

you know the gospels well, you'll know like this passage there are moments when Jesus is far from being sensitive, meek and mild.

Characteristics

Thinking about characteristics and going back to our story, this woman certainly has some admirable characteristics. We can see that she reacted very well and the woman has a very sharp mind, especially when she replies. *“Even the dogs eat the leftovers that fall from the masters table”*. But in amongst all of this there is much more to what is going on. We have to remember again that Matthews Gospel is written for the Jewish community. In this passage we can see the difference reflected when we look at the parallel story in Marks Gospel. Mark misses out completely Jesus’ reference to *‘being sent to the lost sheep of Israel’*, for Mark that’s not important, but for Matthew it is.

Sometimes we as Gentile people, can brush aside the importance of God choosing Israel to be his chosen people. But we have to remember that it was part of God purpose from the beginning and Jesus himself never implied anything different. Israel had to hear the message first because God had chosen them to carry His promise throughout time. OK, they had to be reminded that God had made a covenant with them and Jesus had come to fulfil that

covenant promise, something which isn't shared by orthodox Jews. What I think is really interesting in this short passage, is that perhaps this whole story is a turning point in Jesus' own ministry. It is only a short story, and it's not even about Jewish people so why did Matthew include it in his Gospel? Again, he is teaching about being inclusive, the theme which has resonated over the past few weeks.

Messiah

In the story Jesus realises that the Canaanite woman has great faith. Not only does she believe that Jesus can heal her daughter, but she also calls Jesus "*Son of David*", which is the Jewish title and understanding of the Messiah. She is a Gentile living miles away from Jesus' own territory, yet she knows exactly who he is, but not only that, she recognises him as the Messiah and the only one who can heal her daughter. I think all of this made Jesus somehow realise that his ministry wasn't restricted to the Jewish people. From the story we see that he understands that other people had great faith, faith in who he was and faith in the message that he brings.

Implications

When we read this story, it seems small and insignificant, but the inclusion of it in Matthew's Gospel has huge implications. This is a big step for Jesus, and Matthew is showing us how Jesus' mission and ministry is growing, tearing down the barriers of cultural difference and opening up God's word and promise to include all people. At the start of the story the Canaanite woman is marginalised, on the edge, characterised as a Gentile, an outsider and beyond the reach of God's grace. But Jesus responds to her, he seems to be impressed by her bold approach and the way she engages with him. She knows Jesus is the only one who can help her with her desperate situation and so she approaches him with great respect, but without fear because she has faith in what he is able to do.

At the end of the story Jesus reacts in a way which possibly surprises himself, by telling the woman she had great faith and healing her daughter. But perhaps it was the disciples who were surprised the most by Jesus' response and the outcome of this encounter. Let's face it, at the start of the story it was the disciples that wanted to get rid of the woman. She was being an embarrassment, shouting, carrying on and making a nuisance of herself. They were the ones who came to Jesus and begged him to

send her away. They were the ones who categorised her and thought she had no right to be there. They were the ones who made a judgement about her based on her noisy unconventional actions.

Message

Perhaps there is a message for us in there. Perhaps there is a message for us about not expecting people to conform to our own expectations. About people fitting in with our own preconceived ideas and understandings. The disciples thought the woman was being too disruptive, noisy and a nuisance, therefore they wanted to send her away. She didn't conform to their expectations of how they thought she should behave. And even Jesus rejected her at first, on the grounds of her being a Gentile.

Today's gospel reading challenges a too-comfortable, meek and mild picture of Jesus - he is a strong character, he can be brusque and he certainly had "attitude". This shouldn't really be a surprise, after all, if he hadn't stirred up things and ruffled a few feathers he would not have been crucified. But there is another message for us in that story, and I think it is a message of boldness. It is a message which tells us we can break beyond the boundaries of what is expected. It is a message that tells us we don't need to be

restricted and tied up with the cultural boundaries and expectations which stifle our faith. Who says we have to be quiet about our faith, who says we can't be excited and shout about how great God is? The Canaanite woman was bold in her faith and in her approach to Jesus, so much so that it seems to have changed his own ministry at that time.

God's never ending grace is for all. Let's not put obstacles in people's paths and let us be bold in our own faith, so it may be an example of what is possible through Jesus.