

Jesus & the Syro-Phoenician woman

Matthew 15v21-28 - Jesus and the Syro-Phoenician Woman.

Leaving that place, Jesus withdrew to the region of Tyre and Sidon. A Canaanite woman from that vicinity came to him, crying out, "Lord, Son of David, have mercy on me! My daughter is demon-possessed and suffering terribly." Jesus did not answer a word. So his disciples came to him and urged him, "Send her away, for she keeps crying out after us." He answered, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel." The woman came and knelt before him. "Lord, help me!" she said. He replied, "It is not right to take the children's bread and toss it to the dogs." "Yes it is, Lord," she said. "Even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table." Then Jesus said to her, "Woman, you have great faith! Your request is granted." And her daughter was healed at that moment

Also see Luke 6v27-38 – Love for Enemies

²⁷ "But to you who are listening I say: Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you,²⁸ bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you. ²⁹ If someone slaps you on one cheek, turn to them the other also. If someone takes your coat, do not withhold your shirt from them. ³⁰ Give to everyone who asks you, and if anyone takes what belongs to you, do not demand it back. ³¹ Do to others as you would have them do to you.

³² "If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? Even sinners love those who love them. ³³ And if you do good to those who are good to you, what credit is that to you? Even sinners do that. ³⁴ And if you lend to those from whom you expect repayment, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, expecting to be repaid in full.³⁵ But love your enemies, do good to them, and lend to them without expecting to get anything back. Then your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High, because he is kind to the ungrateful and wicked. ³⁶ Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.

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Matthew 15v21-28

Insults

What is the worst insult spoken to you? How generous to that person did you feel afterwards !! Turn it around, what is the worst insult you have ever spoken, or ever thought about some-one? Why did you feel like that? Have you insulted anyone out of some **prejudice** in your heart?

You're a disciple

I want you to imagine today that you are one of the disciples of Jesus and you are with him in this encounter with a foreign woman. A disciple would have memorised if not all of the Hebrew Scriptures by the time of his Bar Mitzvah at age 13. You have entered in a 2 or 3 year apprenticeship in which you live in communion with your Rabbi and his other disciples. You enter into intense discussion of the scriptures with him to understand how to live obediently to the Word of God. To be accepted as a Rabbi's disciple you have agreed to totally submit to his authority in all areas of interpreting Scripture. You are also watching him intensely to see how he behaves in each situation. You are fully committed to Jesus and his teaching but you are not perfect. You have prejudices. You were brought up, not to like non-Jews and sometimes talk about them to your Jewish mates as scum-dogs, which was a common cultural prejudice ! Your opinion of women is not great, and you think that Jesus is the sole property of Israel, he has come for the Jews – full-stop.

V21 Away from the crowds

So as a disciple, feel the heat of the day, and your aching feet after a long journey. Jesus has been healing the sick in Gennesaret on the North West shore of Galilee, and recently fed 5000 men, plus women and children from some lads lunch-box. So the wild excitement about him has been building rapidly, and there is a danger that the keenness to have Jesus recognised as a Messiah-King could reach the attentions of Herod Antipas who has recently beheaded his cousin John. Jesus has decided to give Galilee a cooling down period, and has withdrawn his party to the north-west. You have followed him on a 2 day walk to the border lands with Phoenicia, a foreign land, and you are feeling a bit uncomfortable so far from the villages and people you know.

You think Jesus needs space and rest, so as his disciples you are keeping any bother away from him. But there is this woman who keeps appearing and crying out to you, making a fuss about her ill daughter. Jewish men are not even supposed to talk to foreign women, she must know that, and yet she won't go away. Damn nuisance! We can't even get him some decent privacy right out here, and she's a Canaanite of all things.

The visitor was from the borderland between Israel and the regions of Tyre & Sidon in Syria (also known as Phoenicia), but this area was known as Syro-Phoenicia (to distinguish it from another area of Phoenicia in North Africa known as Lybo-Phoenicia. This was regarded by Jews as Pagan territory and although she was from this area, she was also a descendant from the ancient Canaanite tribe. Many Canaanite survivors had moved Northwards into this region where they had been conquered by the Israelites, nearly 1500 years previously. The Canaanites were the most morally depised of Israel's enemies. She may have had some previous knowledge of Jesus, perhaps she had met other foreigners who had already been healed by him. She was not the first women from this region to lay a request before a Jewish man of God. Elijah took refuge with a Sidonian woman, and the prophet took the woman out of his misery, by raising her only Son back to life (1 Kings 17v18-19).

V22 The Beggars Cry to the Messiah

You have been doing your best to keep her away from Jesus, but she finally sees him and takes her opportunity. The woman cries out to Jesus. It's a brilliant approach. Sir (Lord) – Son of David – Have Mercy on Me. She comes with respect, faith and humility. Respect as she calls out to him as Sir or Lord. Faith as she then uses the rare title 'Son of David'. This is a messianic title, the promised heir to David's throne (as promised by his prophet Nathan), the God-King that will one day come. [She is unlikely to have understood the full meaning and accuracy of what she said]. Finally with humility – as she uses the the standard Beggars cry 'Have Mercy on me'. It's a bold approach which would have instantly got the attention of Jesus.

But she is also distraught. *"Have mercy on **me** - my daughter has a demon and is in a terrible condition."* She is the primary carer for her daughter and the stress of her loved ones terrible condition has taken its toll on her. It is not mercy for her daughter she has asked for, but it is for Jesus to have mercy on **her**, and put her out of her misery by healing her daughter.

It is a bold approach by this foreign woman. In your opinion as a disciple, she should **not** be approaching your group and asking anything of your Master. It is hard for the woman to do this because she is going against the strong cultural norms.

She is crossing a racial barrier – a gentile asking something of a Jew.

She is crossing a gender barrier – Even today in the Middle East men will talk in public to women they do not know. Other rabbis would not normally be seen speaking to women in public, not even female member of their own family.

V23 The Silence.

Does Jesus love the woman ? Yes. Does he have compassion for her with her sick daughter? Yes. We know this, because we know something of the heart of the God and the nature of Jesus as frequently presented through the Gospel story. But Jesus does not say a word to her.

Disciple - How are you feeling, with all your prejudices, as Jesus seems to be ignoring her cries?

You are somewhat relieved that Jesus has not responded. Surely she could not really have expected Jesus to respond to her. A Canaanite woman. Fraternising with her sort, you could have a mob of local men on you if you are not careful. Jesus came for the House of Israel, for the Jews, he has no business out here with the Gentiles.

She is begging Jesus, and he is stood there saying nothing, **as if** he is trying to decide what to do. He throws you a quizzical look which invites you in to the interaction. It suggests he is thinking - You are my disciples and want to emulate me, so what do you think I should do in this situation? He is allowing the silence to draw out what is on your heart.

It works and you say *“Jesus – send her away, she is following us, and making all this noise”*. In other words, she has been following you for some time now and is getting on your nerves. Its time to send her packing.

But what is Jesus really doing? Every situation he is in, is a teaching opportunity for his disciples. He knows exactly what he is going to do. You cannot separate the acts and teachings of Jesus from his everyday life as a Rabbi and the continual teaching of his followers. So why is he doing nothing? Because of you and your fellow disciples – he has an important lesson to teach you about your prejudices, so he is going to take his time for your sake. He’s judged the situation well. This woman has utmost faith that Jesus can and will heal her daughter, she has humbled herself and persisted. Jesus knows that she is not going to give up easily.

Jesus uses the silence, to give you time to bring your prejudices to the service. In another situation, when a woman is brought to him caught in adultery and her accusers ask him to condemn her by the law – he sits there quietly for a while drawing in the sand. On this occasion he is using the silence to help diffuse the anger and urgency of the mob. When Jesus is quiet it is often a time of self analysis and questioning. Jesus may use silence with us too. Give us times where he seems quiet or distant, a time in which we may need to ask questions of ourselves.

V24 The Rebuff

Jesus looks at you, his disciple and nods. You have asked him to send her away. His smile says OK. I’ll do what you say. He turns to the woman, and speaks out aloud the thoughts you have in your head.

“I have been sent only to the lost sheep of the people of Israel”

You turn to your fellow disciples with a smug look on your face. That should sort it. He’s told her like I said. You all looked rather pleased with what he’s said. *“That’s us baby – we’re the lost sheep of Israel – Baaa Baaa which way God!”*

V25 –Desperate plea

You think it’s a done deal and that she will go then she suddenly comes lurching towards you and Jesus and falls down on her knees right at the very feet of Jesus. This time she drops the beggars pleas and the messianic title, With the sobbing screams of her child still ringing in her ears, in bold simplicity she kneels before Jesus and reduces

her request to a basic cry of 'LORD – HELP ME'. The simplest of prayers. It's the ultimate prayer, the one that we are all reduced to when we reach the boundary of what we can cope with.

Then for the first time you actually see the woman. You have looked at her before but not seen her. Now close-up you can see the puffed up and blood-shot eyes from crying, her weariness from lack of sleep, her forehead etched with line of worry and scratches on her face from her daughter. She catches your eye and holds the stare, as if to accuse you of the rebuff. For the first time, you start feeling a bit uncomfortable. Something changes in you, it's like a small spark from the heart of God has ignited something new in your own heart, and for the first time you start to feel some compassion for this woman. Your views on Israel having a monopoly on Jesus do not feel as convincing right now, and only the hardest of hearts would not be moved by this woman's suffering and desperation. But Jesus has not some profound teaching for you still, there are some deeper stuff in your heart that needs to come out. You certainly were not ready for what came next.

V26 – The Insult

Jesus, looks at you again as if to say - I'm doing what you want – I'll carry on saying what you think. Jesus is not finished with the disciples, he wants them to realise what the attitudes of their heart mean and actually look like, when those thoughts are taking to an ultimate conclusion, and but into practice.

So in answer to her plea Jesus looks he straight in the eyes, and says..

"It isn't right to take the children's food and throw it to the little dogs"

In Middle Eastern culture (Jews and no-Jews) despised dogs almost as much as pigs. They were never kept as pets. If kept, it was as a half wild guard dog. The others were dangerous scavengers roaming the streets looking for scraps of food in the garbage. The use of the term of 'dogs' is primarily for the education of the disciples.

He looks searchingly around at his disciples. You have a very low opinion of Gentiles, you think they are 'dogs' and you want me to treat them like dogs. You think I should only help Israel, only help the Jews. OK, well here's what that 'attitude of your heart' actually sounds like when put into practice.

You think, it's not such bad a thing to ignore a beggar, especially a foreign woman begging for help, but to insult her like this to her face! There's a silence now amongst the disciples.

But these are really your words not Jesus. You had been having those thoughts about 10 minutes ago. You had talked about them as dogs openly in conversation when back in Galilee. But when these attitudes are verbalised now in front of this desperate women, it just seems wrong. What feels right to you now, is for Jesus to extend his love across the gender barrier, across the racial barrier to a Canaanite woman and heal her daughter.

The Test

This is a test for you disciples, one aimed at getting you to realise that you have prejudices in your heart, and these don't sit well with the attitudes and teaching of Jesus, the ones you have bound yourself (as his disciple) to following.

The woman's faith in Jesus would seem to be put to the test here, but surely Jesus has been acting prophetically. He knows that she will persevere. She has passed the silence test, and now she has to respond in the face of a direct insult. It would be too easy for her to see Jesus as another proud Jew happy to verbally attack a Gentile, even one who is suffering so much. For the disciples they can only stand and wonder. How determined is the woman to see

her daughter healed and how much faith does she have that Jesus not only **can** heal her daughter but **is willing** to heal her daughter. Will she absorb the insult and press on.

I think the Canaanite woman had caught on before the disciples had. Perhaps she could hear a nuance in his voice and see a twinkle in his eye. Could she perhaps see that this charade with her was to teach his disciples a lesson. Besides she knew he had helped other women, he had healed other foreigners. She knew he had not come just for the Israelites. At this point I believe her heart started to lift and she had enough about her to stay humble but come back with a brilliant answer.

V27 – The wise response

She dries her eyes, and looks up to Jesus from her position of submission and politely agrees with his statement. She does not react angrily to the insult.

“That’s true Sir –but even the dogs eat the leftovers that fall from their Masters table.”

As a disciple, that wanted to get rid of her - How do you feel now towards her? Her response amazes and chastises you. Such incredible faith. It is a death-nail to your prejudices.

In her response she has shown humility, as she lowers herself to the place of a dog for her response. She has also shown wisdom, in acting her dog-part in order to achieve her goal, and she has shown faith that Jesus will still come through for her and heal her daughter. She has so much confidence in Jesus, despite the words he has spoken.

V28 – The Woman’s faith

I think at this point Jesus must have burst into a beaming smile. He is more than impressed with her, and says to her. “Oh woman – Great is your faith”. She has succeeded in her mission and the disciples have seen and heard enough to learn their lesson. This episode will no doubt seed many conversations and debates that you disciples have with Jesus and with each other over the next few weeks, as you get to grips with this new picture of what the Kingdom of God means. By his words, she is promoted into the Premier league of faith, and her story will be retold and retold for thousands of years to come.

Why is she of great faith? She has recognised him as Messiah (Son of David) and confesses him as Lord. She has recognised him as the agent of God's salvation, not just for the Jews but all people. She is willing to pay any price, in order to receive his Grace.

After commending her for her faith, Jesus then gives her what she has come for and he speaks simple but powerful words of life:-

“What you want will be done for you”

He heals in a prophetic way, as he did at a distance for a Centurion who asked Jesus to heal his servant, but did not feel worthy for Jesus to enter his home. Without laying hand on the girl, casting out demons with a command, or even seeing her, he does it prophetically, and speaks out that her desire has been fulfilled

Instantly the Canaanite's daughter was healed, and as a result the woman herself is released from her agony. We don't know how the disciples heard of the daughter's healing being realised, perhaps he went back to him later, or he went with her.

What about our own prejudices?

You can step out of the disciples body now, and back into your own. What do we think about others who are different from us. What do we sometimes say in private but never to their face. Do we realise what our own prejudices are? Perhaps they surface as subtle jokes or throwaway comments?— You're can never feel safe with people from 'that country'. Typical – women drivers, hey? All those on benefits are scroungers ! Old people are all grumpy! Typical man with a white van – bound to be a cowboy builder. All bankers are crooks. Etc

We need to understand like the disciples, where our prejudices lie, root them out and deal with them. Why, because they hold us back, and they hold back Gods work. He is for all people, all colours, both genders and mixed sexuality, for all classes of people, from the poorest to the richest, those with impeccable behavioural records to those with a history of violence and abuse. God love know no boundaries, except for those that we put up ourselves.

I enjoyed my visits to Victory Church in Cwmbran. The pastors had a history of drug addiction and prison. On release from prison, they went through a Christian rehab centre, came of drugs, found Jesus and went to theological college. One of the pastors once said that when I see a young homeless man, drunk or on drugs, sleeping outside a pub near the hot ventilation pipes, I look at him and think that could be the next pastor.

It is too easy, and look at people and say – Oh I'd be wasting my time with that person, because they would never become a Christian. Wrong on two accounts. First, God can break any chain, can reach hearts in the most unlikely of characters. Secondly, out sharing love or faith with some-one should not depend at all on how likely or not they are to receive Jesus into their lives, we should do it anyway. There are some cases where your words will be wasted and may receive abuse, Jesus describes this as casting pearls before swine. I think these are quite rare, and in those cancel you can preach the gospel without using words, by the example you set

When doing detached youth work on a rough estate, I had some young boys who would ask me to tell them about Jesus, just so they could volley a load of swear words back. I would smile, and say that I was not going to tell them about Jesus today. If pressed, I would say that didn't think they were ready yet to hear about him, but I was happy to tell them all about Jesus when they really wanted to know, and weren't just messing around. But I didn't judge them, and was even willing to stand with them in court when they had no parent to do that for them. That was preaching the gospel without words to those that many had written off and avoided any contact with.

Whilst I may have a heart for street kids and homeless people, where do my own prejudices lie. Where do your prejudices lie? Our prayer must be that Jesus exposes those to us like he did with the disciples. So we can deal with it like they had to. That way we can extend out Church, we can extend his kingdom, without coming up against the limitations that our prejudices put on it.

Loving your enemies.

We may be prejudiced against people because we have been hurt by them , or at least by some-one like them. Yet Jesus tells us to love our enemies. This mind-set is rarely found outside the Christian faith, and not often enough within it.

It sounds so absurd? Why should I love those who hurt me? Why because Jesus is absurdly generous with his love, and he wants us to be like that. I think Jesus would have us think - What is the best thing that you can practically do for the worst person you know? Think about it – then go ahead and do it. Those you want to be nasty to, be

loving and generous to. What would you really like some-one to do for you – okay - now go and do it for them! Its crazy love. Its Jesus love.

It's a way of expressing Christian life that causes an impact. Its like flowers growing through the concrete. But we are not asked to do this in a religious way. Its not a new set of religious rules that Jesus is imposing on us here. That person has been horrible to me, so now I must find the time to do something nice to him, and I will feel guilty until I have done it. No that's not it. This is about having a positive attitude of heart, and a lightness of spirit in the face of everything that the world can throw at you. You add the colour back into a grey situation. Why? Because that is what God is like. He provides good things for all to enjoy whether or not in our opinion they are deserving or undeserving. The mercy and forgiveness he shows in the light of what we do, is incredible, so why should we not try to be merciful also to those we think don't deserve it. We do God a great disservice when we lead gloomy lives, grey and boring lives, which when others read our body language, says to them in bold font that Christianity is boring or Christians are boring.

Our God is different.

Living a life free of prejudice. Loving your enemies. This is different. Not all Gods are the same. If every person in every faith lived by this mandate, then there would be no violence, no revenge, no war, no racial tension, or class divide. How much you own won't be nearly as important as making sure your neighbour is alright.

If all Christians alone started behaving like this, what an impact it would make.

I am inspired by Heidi Baker and husband Rowland. Having been thrown out of Asia as missionaries by the Govt, one day Rowland read in a Time magazine about war torn Mozambique. He says to Heidi, do you want a real mission field, and she excitedly said – Yes lets go. So arrived with their two small children and 20 dollars. They started taking in parentless children and after a while had taken in a thousand of them and gave them a Christian education, Her aim through her Iris ministries is to save 1 million children now. She showed love to them all, even those who stole off her. But her catch-phrase is love the one, whoever it is – Love the one that God puts in front of you.

We are called to drop our prejudice, and to love our enemies. A simple instruction but scarcely seen.

Yet this is what Jesus did. He lived an exuberant and generous lifestyle. Power flowed out of him healing people of all types, sometimes whole villages. Even when they ripped off his tunic, striped his back, and thrust a crown of thorns into his head, he went on loving his enemies to the end.

He spoke and demonstrated about what he knew which was the extravagant, boundless, infinite, measureless, unconditional love of God. We should do the same to all the people that God puts in front of us, free from any prejudice. Amen.