

Sermon for Sunday 16<sup>th</sup> August, Trinity 10

**Strangers, dogs and women**

1 Cor 12:1-11

Matthew 15:21-28

The story of the Canaanite woman is rather a puzzle for readers, teaches and preachers. Let's take a look.

Jesus has left Jerusalem and departed to the region of Tyre and Sidon. He and his disciples are now outside Israel and in the country of the Gentiles. The first question is, why has he left Israel? We are not told.



Then a local woman approaches Jesus and asks him to cure her daughter, who was severely-demon possessed. She calls him, Son of David, so she knew exactly to whom she was speaking. She knows he was a Jew and that he is of the house and lineage of David, and she calls him Lord. That tell us that she knows Jesus is the Messiah and so she turns to him for help.

But Jesus answered her not a word. Why? Was it because she was a woman? Was it because she was not a Jew? Was it because Jesus had gone to Tyre and Sidon to have a rest and didn't want to be bothered with her?

The disciples certainly thought she was a nuisance and they asked Jesus to send her away.

And Jesus response is even more shocking. He took ignores her, but speaks to his disciples, saying, "I was only sent to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." The woman is not one of those lost sheep, apparently, so her problems are not Jesus' concern.

Then the woman kneels at his feet and implores him, "Lord, help me!" Jesus' response is still incredible. He says, still apparently addressing his disciples, "It is not good to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs."



Is he really calling her a dog? I notice that the translation we used today softens the insult by referring to "little dogs" meaning the household pets. Matthew's original Greek could refer to the feral dogs hanging around the outskirts of a town.

At this point we might find ourselves asking, "Did Jesus really say this?" After all, he cured the Centurion's servant and he cured the Gerasene demoniac, and they were Gentiles. What's going on? Is Matthew rewriting the story to make it more dramatic? Or perhaps the rudeness reflects the disciples' own prejudices.

Could be, the disciples were ignorant me and often misunderstood Jesus.

But now we come to the turning point. The woman says, "Even the dogs eat the crumbs which fall from their master's table."

We might think this is a clever answer to Jesus comment. The wild dogs at the edge of town may not be fed, but the faithful pets in the house are waiting to be fed with the leftovers.

But it's much more than that. It is a profound insight of faith. The dogs under the table are different from the children sitting around it, just as the Gentiles and Jews are different. But all can receive a share of the good things on God's table, children and dogs, Jews and Gentiles. The children don't go hungry and neither do the dogs. Everyone can receive the good things of God.

This little sentence brings the story to a halt. If this was a film, then the action would be frozen. Jesus and his disciples would be standing there, stock still, not moving a muscle. And the camera would pan from Jesus' face back to the woman's face, for she has spoken a great truth.

It is one of the great truths of the Gospel. One of the great truths of the Bible in fact!



There is no one, no one on earth, who is outside the love of God. If you like, this story starts by setting up barriers, barriers of race, religion and gender, and then, in one sentence, demolishes them.

Jesus now answers and speaks directly to this foreigner, this gentile, and speaks to her directly and respectfully, "O woman, great is your faith! Let it be as you desire." And her daughter was healed from that very hour.

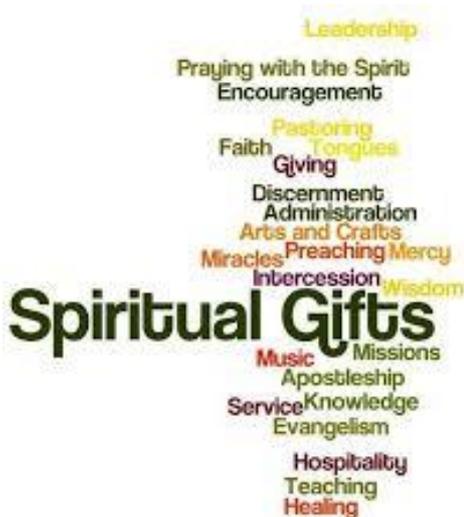
At last the puzzle is solved. The story is not about prejudice and rudeness, it is about the love of God and it is about faith.

These are the two things which break barriers, God's love, and our faith. How often do we hear Jesus commending someone for their faith? How often does he say, "Your faith has healed you."

It is the interaction between God's love and our faith which brings results. By ourselves, however much or little faith we have, we can achieve nothing. If you like, our faith can be compared to an electric mixer in our kitchen. We can add the sugar, eggs, and flour, following the recipe carefully. We can even switch on the motor, but if it's not connected to the power, then nothing will happen. However, put the plug in the socket and we can start making cake.

Our faith needs God's love to make it work. Our faith needs God's love to guide it in the right direction. If we hope, by our faith, to achieve something evil, then God's love will not allow that to happen. Jesus said that if we had faith the size of a mustard seed, then we could say to a tree, be uprooted and planted in the sea. But if it this does not express the working of God's love, then that tree will not be moved.

St Paul makes the very same point in his first Epistle to the Corinthians which we heard today. He refers to the Holy Spirit and how the Spirit inspires a whole diversity of gifts, ministries, and activities.



The Holy Spirit is God's love at work in the world and all the wonderful things described by Paul are inspired in by the working of God's love. No one, speaking by the Spirit of God calls Jesus accursed. Of course not, because that is not in accordance with God's love. And if we love God, then we will call Jesus Lord and bless his holy name.

And if we love God, then our faith will enable us to do great things.

We may ask, what things? And Paul's answer would to us the same as it was to the Philippians, "Beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honourable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.

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