

Sun 16th - Communion - 10th Sunday after Trinity

Sue Sims - intercessions

Cathryn Candy - reading

Matthew 15: 21-28

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.

O woman - great is your faith.. O woman - deeply moved - Jesus looks at her. Your daughter is healed.

A woman came to Jesus and asked him for something. This woman knew that Jesus was the Messiah of God, that he alone could free her daughter from this terrible curse of demon possession. We're not told what it is, but that she is "suffering terribly". Any parent knows how it feels for your child to be sick - you'd do anything, try anything, to restore them to health. This woman is tired, exhausted, desperate, yet she has hope. Hope in Jesus.

So she does a remarkable thing, she breaks 2 massive cultural laws. As a woman, she talks to a man. As a gentile she talks to a Jew.

You might remember the Samaritan woman at the well in John 5 - which is nearly as bad - except that Samaritans had been Jews, who'd sold out to Rome. This woman was a Canaanite - different versions translate it differently - but it's the only place in the New Testament where the word Canaanite occurs - and as soon as you hear it - you remember the old Testament. When the Jews, God's chosen people, were rescued from Egypt, through the Red Sea, led by God's mighty hand across the desert - a cloudy pillar by day, a fiery one by night. Receiving the 10 commandments, and being fed manna - they are given the promised land - the land of Canaan - where the Canaanites live. And they are told - do not mix with the locals - be separate - I will drive them out before you. But you must not intermarry or have anything to do with them. Be pure, be clean.

And Jesus has come from Genesaret, in Galilee - fielding questions from Pharisees and Scribes who had come down from London / Jerusalem - and he was talking about what was clean and unclean and the Jewish ritual laws. They are trying to trap him - prove he can't be the Messiah because he's not Jewish enough. And as an outlaw, a hunted man, it's safer for him to be in non-Jewish land - so he's up in Tyre and Sidon, where there are more Gentiles than Jews. And these cultural rules might seem quaint to us, or ridiculous or unimportant. But unless you grasp their importance, you cannot see the enormous gulf that this woman and Jesus cross in this story.

Because this is not just about way back when, interesting history 2000 years ago - today, today in India - people born in lower castes, are forced to be separate from others. As a way of ruling India the Persians divided people into a hierarchy - some were at the top, some were at the bottom, and some were so low they are not even on the ladder. People like the Dalits, and I lived among them in 1990 something. They are only allowed to do jobs that are unclean for Hindus - dealing with dead animals - so they're in the leather and tanning business. And they are street sweepers, dung cleaners, sewage cleaners. They are not allowed to look at an ordinary Indian. They are not allowed to let their shadow fall on a full Indian. So they are not allowed to live in the village, but they build their houses on the North Side, so they never block the Sun from the rest of the village.

Because they are “nothing” - people abuse them - take their property or land, use them as slaves. Even though there are laws passed to abolish the caste system. Even though Dalits have managed to be elected to the parliament and some, a tiny minority, have stood up for themselves - most are disrespected, outcasts. And funnily enough, when the missionaries came to India, the Dalits converted en-masse - from a religion that said they didn't exist, to a religion that said - Jesus came for the poor and outsider.
This woman is like a Dalit.

Or what might it mean to be black or a minority, in America or in Britain? Less likely to go to university, less likely to have a job, more likely to be paid less, and do die younger. If you're black you won't see other black people in most TV programmes, or running businesses, or as lawyers or architects - the sub-conscious message is - this is not for you - you're 'welcome' to be here, but only in the bits we let you.
This woman is like a black person

Or what if you're gay? This is changing so fast, and I'm so pleased, but not fast enough for everyone. A gay guy who came to me when I was a curate - his father (a vicar) had kicked him out and disowned him when he came out. He knew who he was and that he loved men, and he also knew that he loved God and wanted to follow God. The trouble was - that the christian community told him that God hated him for being Gay, and the Gay community hated God and Christians because they oppressed them. It got so bad that he'd tried to commit suicide - and he came to talk to me, and I was the first clergy person to say - its ok, you're welcome here, God loves you - just as you are.

But that's the size of a cultural taboo - a hidden law, that this Canaanite woman has grown up with and lived with. And that Jesus, the disciples, and the Jewish nation also grew up with, lived with.

And I'm sorry to say, that all the prejudice, disadvantage and lower status that apply to women now, in Britain, also applied to her, because she was a woman, back then.

So Jesus is trying to have some time out. To rest.

And here is this woman - with a desperate situation, her precious daughter, and she has heard about Jesus. About the miracles, about the teaching. And she calls out - Lord. Son of David, have mercy on me. That is exactly what a Jew would call the Messiah - She calls him Lord. She calls him Son of David - she knows who he is, and what he can do. And the disciples just do what any normal Jewish person would do - I mean, I'm not being racist!! - just send her away. She's crying, she's annoying.

And wow is Jesus in a dilemma. Is this woman sent by those Pharisees to test him, to see if he's going to break a cultural law? As the Messiah, Jesus mission to Israel is about Gods faithfulness to Israel, that can't be avoided or watered down. And so he turns and says to his disciples, but she must be very close to overhear him - I was only sent to the lost sheep of Israel. He's said this several times before in Matthew's gospel. Matthew who writes to an ultra orthodox Jewish Christian community. This phrase, this religious jargon, that as a Canaanite she shouldn't even be able to understand.

And it feels like he's going to say - now leave.

And then she kneels before him - *proskunema* - worships him.
A Canaanite woman, a gentile woman - worships the messiah
“Help me..”

And now Jesus talks to her, and from this moment you know that something's changed. I mean when Jesus speaks - it means he sees her, she's not invisible, she's not nothing, the God of the universe has acknowledged her, has heard her cry.. something will happen. We don't know what - but something.

And Jesus challenges her. Which is normal for Jesus.

Think of the man by the pool - do you want to be healed? or the rich young man - sell all your possessions. Jesus cuts through all the horse manure..

And again he speaks to this foreign woman in Jewish picture language. We are the children of Israel, but you're just like a house-dog, why should I help you?

And it is offensive, we should be shocked. It is what Jewish people called gentiles sometimes. Is Jesus just testing her, pushing to see how deep is her faith? Is he doing some psychotherapy - helping her to somehow take the power out of that offensive word? That part of her blockage is about her identity?

I don't know - and I'm not a Dalit, or black, or gay or a woman - so maybe I have no right to comment.

But what happens next, when they meet on this bridge crossing the cultural worlds - is fireworks and miracles.

Oh she knows who "the children" are, and she sounds a bit like Jesus, or Jewish Rabbi, is doing a clever answer back.. but even the dogs get the scraps..

please Lord - I'm desperate - you're the Messiah, you're Jesus, you can do this...

no wonder Jesus is so moved. O woman - O woman..
only 2 people are commended for having faith in the gospels. Most of the time - its you of little faith, why did you doubt, and all that stuff.

Both of those people are outsiders - the roman centurion who'd payed for a synagogue, and whose daughter was sick. And this woman.

Great is your faith!!! At last, someone who believes in me! Your daughter is healed. Of course she is!

And what started out as a story that reinforced the separation of Jews and Gentiles.

That stressed that Jesus was all about the lost sheep of Israel

has become a trumpet blast that says
- yes, but the Jews are chosen in order to show the rest of the world.

The Jews will be saved and through them the rest of the world will know God.

Suddenly the passages in Isaiah ring true
- that they will come from the East and the West, and all the world will come to know that God loves them.

You will be a light to the gentiles.

Even the wise men at Christmas - gentiles coming to Jesus.

Jesus is not a white racist - he is for the outsider, for the minority, for the left aside, the pushed down, those with no self esteem left. To all - he says - come. Come and receive the water of life, come and have life in abundance.

And whether its you, or someone you know, today - come and bring that cry of "help me" to God. To Jesus. Because he has the power to save you, and you know he's a forgiver.