

SERMON

Matthew 15.21-28

Jesus left that place and went away to the district of Tyre and Sidon. Just then a Canaanite woman from that region came out and started shouting, 'Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon.' But he did not answer her at all. And his disciples came and urged him, saying, 'Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us.' He answered, 'I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.' But she came and knelt before him, saying, 'Lord, help me.' He answered, 'It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs.' She said, 'Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table.' Then Jesus answered her, 'Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.' And her daughter was healed instantly.

This story today has so much that troubles me...

How is it ok that the disciples are complaining that a desperate mother with a tormented daughter is bothering them?

How is it ok that Jesus himself at first ignores this desperate woman then thwarts her request and insults her?

It really troubles me that in this culture we can see this woman marginalised based on gender, foreignness, religion, ethnicity, and mental/physical health.

I wonder how troubled you are as well – how do you find the woman – honestly – do you find the woman obnoxious? Or perhaps admirably assertive and clever? Or maybe embarrassingly self-effacing and servile?

Honestly – how do you find Jesus in this account – does he feel a bit cruel and indifferent – not answering the woman, or his reference to this woman in relation to the dogs - as rude?

I mean – how do you even feel about me asking me that question – it is troubling isn't it?

Maybe you are working hard to hear a friendlier tone in Jesus' words so that you can explain his behaviour – because what we actually hear is just too troubling?

I wonder – when you read this story of you find that Jesus or the Canaanite woman is the main character in the story? In other words – who is changing whom? Perhaps it is not that simplistic or polarising?

This troubling story is a hugely important one - the Canaanite woman is the first woman to speak directly in Matthew's gospel—and she is the only character who appears to challenge Jesus in a battle of wits. We see a woman who stands her ground – she is the outsider – but yet she challenges Jesus and petitions him – essentially she argues her case showing that she is bold – she is an important woman in our Christian tradition.

Many biblical scholars down the ages have tried to argue that Jesus wasn't really nasty to the woman – he wasn't really a bit racist and rude... scholars have said many things to make it less troubling - like he was just testing her so that she could demonstrate she had great faith.

However - I find this story comes alive when we take it at face value – when we investigate the troubling things. When we think Jesus shows us an example of how to encounter those who are different or those with fewer power privileges.

This bold and strong foreign woman - was challenging Jesus and the social and religious norms to get her daughter healed...

Throughout history — both in the Bible and in other places — still today we see it — that those who have less power status than others — are silenced or put in their place.

This is what this passage feels like. It feels like the powerless woman is told to get back in her place — the disciples want her to go away and disappear — Jesus says that healing isn't for her — he says that his healing is just for the chosen ones — the ones who are in the circle — the ones who have the power. Jesus essentially refers to the woman and her daughter as dogs — he even says its not fair that she should have a bit of Jesus and his healing power.

But this passage has a powerful and bold response- because the foreign woman - the Canaanite woman calls out Jesus when he tries to shut her down.

I love that when Jesus appears to squash her voice and tries to silence her, she speaks up. She kneels in front of Jesus and says that she is worthy — even the dogs eat the scraps — her response is so bold and confident — it feels like a tiger mum — hugely strong and Jesus rewards her boldness and recognises her faith — and her daughter is healed.

However - it would not have occurred without her persistence. She probably knew 'her place' since she was a first century woman in a culture where women had little to no voice or power. But she did not stay there. She acknowledged 'her place' - she acknowledged the power and the status she lived in - but she also asked for mercy and had the faith that her daughter would be healed.

And her faith paid off. Her daughter was healed.

So what does this story call us to do?

Firstly — I think we need to acknowledge the power and the status imbalances we live with - we need to ask ourselves where is the power? Who has the power?

Most of us have a mix of power — dominant in some areas and not in others...

The people with the majority power tend to be...

Men, White, Educated, Rich, Straight, Able-bodied, and a home national.

That means that those without power are generally

Women, Black, Uneducated, Poor, Gay, Disabled and foreign...

Acknowledging the power is important and Jesus shows us that all are important in response to this woman — but he does change his mind — he does respond — he doesn't continue blindly without changing his attitude.

How are you powerful? Who do you have the power advantage over? Maybe a strange question — but important to consider...

How do you feel disempowered? How are you at a disadvantage to others? What unfairness do you experience just because you are you?

Where in our society do you recognise unfair power — who is badly treated simply because of their status? We need to ask the questions and look with honesty at our world.

So we need to recognise where the power is...

But we also need to be bold and daring like this woman and speak up where there is unfairness.

We need to be bold and persistent like this incredible woman.

This story reminds us not to stay in our place as defined by society.

And not to put others in their place as defined by society.

This Canaanite woman should urge not just us – but the Church at large to listen to our outsiders—to make space for their pleas and perspectives.

Yet – like many established institutions - the church's powers and structures do not easily accommodate these voices.

In today's church the outside voices shouting to engage Jesus and his followers and claim healing and blessing include the LGBT community.

These people shouting to be recognised – to be included are like the marginalised 'gentiles' of our culture, too long excluded by modern religious authorities. Today, in order to lay claim to their full inclusion they and we as an inclusive church must pester the church authorities who hope to silence them and send them on their way. We must be bold. We must have great faith.

The Canaanite woman challenges me – not just in my life perspective but also in my prayer life.

Following her boldness – in challenging and petitioning - what may seem to be irreverence might, in Jesus's eyes, be considered 'great faith.' I come as I am to Jesus – to lay before him all that feels wrong or unfair – I come as I am.

I am relieved to follow this woman as I pray – because it is good to engage in dialogue in prayer– it is good in my prayers to be completely honest and daring and bold.

We can approach God with boldness. Whoever we are – whatever our position – we can come to Jesus with boldness.

May we be troubled by this woman – and be moved to work for greater equality and inclusion.

May we be moved by this woman – and approach God with boldness and great faith.

Amen.