

A Canaanite Woman

A sermon preached at St Stephen's Uniting Church, Macquarie Street, Sydney on Sunday 17 August 2014, by Clive Pearson. The Readings were Genesis 45:1-15, Romans 11:1-2a.29-32 and St Matthew 15:21-28.

Let me take a liberty; let me tempt you. Come with me on a trip; pack your bags; make sure you've got your passport; put the dog or cat in care. Come with me. Make sure you've got your iphone, your samsung galaxy – put it on in-flight mode and switch off the data roaming. Please make sure you've included your imagination; you'll need that. Come with me – to another time, another place

Quite often I invite congregations to come on a trip with me. Quite often I will try and take you back and test your capacity to live without much of what we take for granted. So for the next 15-20 minutes forget about Woolworths and Coles; there are no supermarkets where we're going; you don't have to worry whether your Visa card goes into the slot this way or that; there is no EFTPos, there are no credit cards, and no one has yet thought of paywave. There are no cars, no fridges; there is no electricity.

I wonder if you've noticed. Every Sunday we go back in time. The biblical text comes to us from a world which is not our daily world. It is full of strange names and practices – and, truth to tell, we would ourselves be strangers there: our clothes, our diet, our sunglasses, our language would make us aliens if all of sudden, by some strange quirk of time travel, we now found ourselves inside the cultures, the worlds we find represented in the Bible. Our Scriptures are like a series of foreign countries and we visit them regularly, Sunday by

Sunday -though we very rarely prepare ourselves for such in the way in which we go on holiday to Europe, America, Asia, the islands today.

Where would you like to go? On either side of this last Christmas I invited several congregations to come with me to Syria. I will concede that may seem like a rather dangerous option at the moment. For some time, night after night, the television news has been full of civil war, the bombing of innocents and the desire to find a peaceful change of direction. With the sudden rise of ISIS the security risk is high. Syria would not be high on most people's desired destinations these days, but I'm fairly sensitive to your needs, and so we would not go on a trip to Damascus in the here and now. We would go back in time.

And we would do so for good reason. Ever since November we have been in the company of Matthew's gospel. In about 3 months' time Mark will replace Matthew. For now, though, we are in the care of Matthew - and his gospel is the equivalent of our *Lonely Planet* or *Fodor's Guide* for this trip. We are going back in time to the community for which this story of Jesus life and ministry was written. The year is probably around about 80AD, maybe a little bit later, but not much. Our destination is probably the great city of Antioch which now lies in ruins.

Imagine our service of worship this morning is not happening in St Stephens. This is not Macquarie Street. And no one has ever heard of Sydney – or, for that matter Australia. Imagine instead that you have come together in this

small, recently established church in Antioch and you hear read out this morning the story of a Canaanite woman and her encounter with Jesus.

In the text Jesus has made way up towards the north west; he has left behind the disputes he has been in with the Pharisees who had made their way up from Jerusalem to Galilee. He has made way towards the coast and the cities of Tyre and Sidon. Jesus is with his disciples. He has crossed into the province of Syria. And, all of sudden, the peace is disrupted. This time is not one of the Pharisees wishing to argue with him about what constitutes purity.

This time a woman bursts forth; she is shouting, her daughter, she says, is possessed by a demon. She is breaking boundaries; she is crossing cultures; she is not behaving like a woman from her kind of background should. Imagine the disruption. The disciples seek to put a wall around Jesus; they seek to act on what they believe is his behalf. They urge him to send the woman away for she is shouting, note, 'after us'. It is they who are unsettled. It is they who are uncomfortable. It is not Jesus at all.

The woman persists. Jesus responds: he was sent to the sheep of the lost house of Israel; his ministry is to the people of his own race and faith. The woman persists. 'Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David'. Her care of her daughter demands that she break boundaries and so she does. She does something quite exceptional. She is determined. She kneels before Jesus and asks him to help her. Then she presses him further. In a way which no disciple ever does this Canaanite woman seemingly widens the scope and horizon of Jesus' ministry. She takes Jesus on; she answers back and her tongue is quick.

Jesus may well now be in the province of Syria. But he had previously confined his healing, his teaching ministry to the people of Israel; they regard men and women from this kind of cultural background as 'dogs'. That is the kind of popular slang they used to call the Gentiles, those who do belong to the same race. Jesus appears harsh: 'It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs'. Were he to say that in today's Australia one might wonder how we would fare under Section 18C of the Race Vilification Act.

But this woman she is persistent; she does not let go. Even the crumbs that fall from the table will do for the likes of her. Jesus is struck by her great faith; she is an outsider; she does not belong and yet she recognizes that there is healing, there is good news in this stranger: her daughter is healed. The ministry of Jesus has been stretched beyond what it had been. It now includes 'the others'.

In the gospel of Matthew Jesus had instructed his disciples only to go to the house of Israel. They had been told to go nowhere among the Gentiles and enter no town of the Samaritans. Now Jesus himself is in the province of Syria; this Canaanite woman has led him to widen the scope of his ministry; it's an act which comes in the immediate wake of his controversy with the Pharisees from Jerusalem, in the wake of Herod having John the Baptist to death, and Jesus himself being driven out of his own home town. Now this woman shows great faith; the contrast is striking.

Imagine yourself now in church in Antioch; you have travelled back in time to be here. You know a bit about these people. Every 3 years our services of worship in your own time, your own place back in Sydney, follows the gospel written for those folk back in Antioch. You have become familiar with them without quite knowing them. Yes, this gospel is a lot like Mark and Luke, but there are differences. Maybe you've noticed them.

In Matthew there is a sermon on the mount; in Luke there is a sermon on the plain; there are a lot of dreams going on in Matthew; it seems as if Joseph the dreamer is more important than Mary; there is no Magnificat here; the birth story is quite different; this is gospel in which there are no shepherds out in their fields; there are wise men instead and it's only in this gospel that Joseph and Mary flee to Egypt with the infant Jesus – and that is why you may have seen around the place this year fellow Christians, fellow members of the Uniting Church wearing t-shirts, proclaiming that Jesus was a refugee. In Matthew's gospel he was.

This is the only gospel in which Jesus is named Emmanuel, meaning God is with us: that comes near the beginning and the last lines of the gospel have the risen Jesus saying 'I am with you to the close of the age'. The purpose of this whole gospel is to show how God is with us in and through the life, dying and rising of Jesus of Nazareth, the Christ. This is the only gospel which talk about the church – and those whom you visit in Antioch today will know that those references are directed at them and how they run their church, how they seek to be followers of the way, together in each other's company.

If you were to talk with them at morning tea (or the equivalent afterwards) there are a few questions you shouldn't ask them: like, whether or not they like the parables of the prodigal son and the good Samaritan. They have never heard of them. Those parables are only in Luke ... and, if you were to ask them, what it means for them to follow Christ, you might hear them say that it is a way of wisdom, a way of righteousness and justice, and it is a way in Christ is present to them in the stranger, in the least, in the most vulnerable. This gospel puts a lot of weight on wisdom and justice. Imagine back in your own time; imagine your church meetings asking not who will do this? have we got the money to do that? - but rather what is the wise thing to do? What is the just thing to do? In the biblical tradition wisdom is concerned with mercy, compassion, discerning, justice and care of creation.

Now that you have got to know them a little bit more you might ask what did they make of this morning's reading. What did they think of that story to do with the Canaanite woman? That would make for an interesting conversation. Antioch is also in Syria. It is further to north than Tyre and Sidon. And they are a generation or two down the track from Jesus' own time and ministry. They know all about how the gospel is now for Jew and Gentile - though they themselves seem to be more Jewish in origin than Gentile. Of all the gospels Matthew is the most Jewish in a whole variety of ways.

I can imagine one or two eyebrows still being raised at that story. It is really rather shocking. You see the woman is not just an ordinary, everyday, Gentile woman. She is a Canaanite; she is a descendant of the original inhabitants of the land; her people lived in the land promised to Moses long before the

Hebrew people, the people of Israel, crossed over the Jordan. We might say that in today's categories she is indigenous.

If I could bring you back home now, back from Antioch, to here, to this place she would of course be a person of 'middle eastern appearance' as we say. There is food for thought for us here. We now live in a city, a culture, a country which is much changed. It is religiously and culturally very diverse. We are called to follow Christ in a city where our neighbour may be from another faith; she may wear an hijab – or maybe a burqa; our neighbour may on the other hand wonder why you 'still' go to church; they may be an atheist, an agnostic or simply don't care; our neighbour may be deeply suspicious of the Christian faith - there are so many skeletons which have been let out of the closet and there is a legacy to the hurts and wounds; your fellow Christian may come from another culture and, all of us, who live in this land who are not indigenous, are what the Constitution of the Uniting Church calls 'second peoples'.

The story of the Canaanite woman is a timely reminder not to dismiss the insights and concerns of those who do not share yours or my religious or cultural background; it is a reminder that even if we are unsettled, if we wish them to be sent away, if we wish them to leave us alone, then the response of Jesus was not the same as that. Yes, he was seemingly not very forthcoming at first; yes, his language was initially harsh; but he paid attention to her, to her needs, and her responses extended his ministry and mission. This story made me think of the Muslim women I know who like to talk about Jesus – though in a different way from what I am used to; it made me think of indigenous

women who weave a story of family, aunties, and of hopes around their talk of Jesus. Maybe there is some food for thought here.

Perhaps it was worth paying a visit to ancient Antioch; so often our reading of the gospel is piecemeal; so often it is full of bits and pieces and we cannot always get the big picture of what the gospel is all about. Those folk back in Antioch can help us; they knew that this gospel Matthew wrote for them was about forgiveness, healing, wisdom, that which is right and just; they also knew that Jesus comes to us like an unseen stranger ... and there are plenty of strangers with backgrounds not the same as ours living in this city. Those strangers invite us to consider again the question: who is our neighbour, for Christ's sake: in this morning's story from the gospel it was an indigenous woman of Middle Eastern appearance in need.

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