

Isaiah 56:1, 6-8; Ps 67, Rom 11:1-2a, 29-32; Matt 15: (10-20), 21-28

If we are to be honest, I think we would have to say that Jesus does not come out of today's gospel reading at all well. There is this distraught woman whose daughter is, as St Matthew tells us, 'tormented by a demon.' That is how people in the ancient world understood what we would recognise today as mental illness. With all the persistence of a mother's love for her distressed child, she keeps shouting to Jesus as she follows him along the road, undeterred by the disciples' exasperation with her. And what does Jesus do? He ignores her and keeps on walking; he even explains to the disciples why he is right to ignore her. Eventually, the woman runs ahead, gets in front of him and kneels down in his path, and says simply, 'Lord, help me!' Jesus is forced to respond to her, but he gives her such a rude answer, 'It is not fair to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs.'

It is really interesting that two of the four Evangelists include this unflattering story about Jesus in their gospels: Mark (7:24-30) and Matthew, who seems have got it from Mark. Mark softens the harshness of Jesus' words a little by having Jesus say, 'Let the children be fed first'—in other words, Jews have first call on his ministry; and this woman is a foreigner. In Matthew's gospel though, Jesus refuses her outright and then goes on to justify this. His mission is only to the people of Israel.

There is no getting away from the problem that Jesus refers to the woman as a dog. Even if the word he uses could be a term of endearment for a little pet dog, or a puppy that hovered and 'hoovered' under the family table at mealtimes. According to Mark, the woman came from a Greek-speaking city in Syria. According to Matthew though, she is a Canaanite and this is quite a loaded term. In the Bible, the Canaanites are the various indigenous peoples that the Israelites felt entitled to dispossess, expel and even kill, when they were taking over the Promised Land. So, from the Jewish perspective, the Canaanites are people with no rights. We know that the Israelites did not succeed in getting rid of all of the Canaanites in the land, because here and there in the Bible we find Canaanite religious practices, like fertility rites and sacred prostitution, being criticised or suppressed. So, when Matthew refers to the woman as a Canaanite, we can see that he is carrying a lot of cultural 'baggage.'

The Canaanite woman is one of the most fascinating women in the whole Bible. She risks xenophobia and hostility to get help for her daughter. Her feisty and witty answer stops Jesus in his tracks. Strange as it may seem to us, she teaches him a lesson. We tend to think that Jesus was absolutely perfect from the moment of his birth, forgetting that, because he was truly human, he had to learn, just as all of us do. Recognising cultural baggage for what it is and coming to the point where we can let it go, is part of the learning process of growing into human maturity. We all have to do that. So Jesus had both learning and unlearning to do. The wonderful thing about this story is that we find a woman challenging Jesus to enlarge his horizon. In fact, she helped him to discern his vocation more clearly. It seems that he did, at first, expect that his ministry would be limited to Jews. When he sent his twelve apostles ahead to preach and heal, he said, "Go nowhere among the Gentiles, and enter no town of the Samaritans, but

go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel (Matt 10:5-6). Yet, at the end of the gospel we find the risen Lord commissioning his disciples to go and make disciples of all nations (Matt 28:19). Where did that come from? How do we explain this apparent contradiction?

I think that the Canaanite woman who would not take 'no' for an answer provides the key. Matthew has a couple of scenes where Jesus is amazed at the faith of foreigners. Remember the story of the Roman centurion that we heard a few weeks ago, the one who said, 'Lord I am not worthy to have you come under my roof; but only speak the word and my servant will be healed' (Matt 8:5-13). Jesus said, 'Truly I tell you, in no one in Israel have I found such faith.' He has just as much praise for the Canaanite mother, 'Woman, great is your faith!'

Of course, Matthew's gospel was written a good fifty years after the ministry of Jesus, so it reflects fifty years' expansion of the Jesus movement far beyond the boundaries of the land of Israel. We know from other New Testament writings that a really big question for the early followers of Jesus was whether or not foreigners/gentiles who wanted to join their community should be required to take on the observance of the Jewish Law so that, religiously speaking, they would be Jews—converts to Judaism. The impressive faith in Jesus that so many gentiles demonstrated really stopped the early church leaders in their tracks—just as the Canaanite woman stopped Jesus in his—and forced them to re-think their position on foreigners.

Again, they had a lot of cultural baggage to let go of. Their Holy Scriptures were not immune from the effects of negativity towards foreigners. The downside of considering yourselves to be God's chosen people can be xenophobia and there is quite a bit of that in the Bible. There is also trenchant critique of xenophobia, some of it no less powerful for being subtle, like the Book of Ruth, the story of King David's great grandmother. You might think you could get no more Jewish than the great king who ruled over the twelve tribes in a golden age, but this book shows that David has Moabite genes in his DNA! And, as Matthew tells us (Matt 1:5-6), he is an ancestor of Jesus! Even that lovely passage that we heard from Isaiah today shows the impact of xenophobia. Isaiah would not have felt the need to write so inclusively if there were not people around who were saying, 'What right have these foreigners to think they can come into the temple?' Isaiah had to insist that God welcomed foreigners, that the temple was meant to be a house of prayer for all peoples, that anyone who wanted to live as God's servant was acceptable, regardless of their nationality.

The more those early believers in Jesus looked at their Scriptures, the more they came to see that God wanted all nations to experience the blessings that Jesus brought. The psalm sung today would be just one example,

Let the peoples praise you, O God;

Let all the peoples praise you.

That could just as easily be translated, 'Let the gentiles praise you, O God' or 'Let all the nations praise you.'

So, getting back to our Canaanite woman, her presence in Matthew's narrative must surely be a reflection of the presence of strong, insistent foreign women whose

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impressive faith in Jesus stopped leaders of the early Christian community in their tracks and forced them to reconsider their ideas about who was entitled to be a follower of Jesus.

I think that there is an important lesson here for us today. We too can ignore the cries of mothers on behalf of their distressed children living in refugee camps, or here in Ireland living in direct provision, or homeless mothers struggling to provide a home life for their children in a hotel room without even a table for the family to sit around for their meals, let alone a dog to Hoover up the crumbs. Maybe we need to be stopped in our tracks and forced to reconsider our attitude. The wonderful thing is that in Jesus, God has come among us as a real human being who had to learn to broaden his perspective and to unlearn some culturally acquired attitudes. May God bless us with that gift!