



LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

Evangelical • Reformed • Catholic

The Second Sunday in Lent: From Dogs to Sons and Daughters

St. Matthew 15:21-28

Fr. William Klock

March 5, 2023

In today's Gospel, St. Matthew tells us about a Canaanite mother. Her daughter was sick. "Oppressed by a demon," Matthew says, which could mean that she actually was suffering from some kind of demonic activity, but it could also mean something like epilepsy or seizures—the Greek term literally means "moonstruck"—and it was often attributed to demons. Whatever was wrong with this girl, it was clearly something awful and her mother was desperate for her to be healed. I expect she had exhausted every option. She'd been to doctors and witchdoctors and priests. In Sidon there was a temple dedicated to the Phoenician god Eshmun, a god of healing. Interestingly enough in light of the exchange that takes place between this woman and Jesus, modern archaeologists—some at least—think that dogs had a sacred place in the ceremonial and rituals of Eshmun. I expect that this Canaanite woman would have taken her daughter to that pagan temple devoted to healing. That would have been the normal—not to mention expected—thing for her to do. Her hopes were high. Surely this god of healing could do something for her daughter. But nothing. And so the seizures—or whatever it was—continued and this mother grieved for her daughter. I think as parents most of us can identify with that. When our children are sick, we grieve for them, we pray for them, we want them to get better and it's frustrating and tiring and discouraging when, no matter what we do, no matter who we take them to, no one seems to be able to do anything. Sometimes we may even feel as though God has let us down. We heap guilt on ourselves, thinking that maybe our faith is lacking. I expect that's exactly how

this woman felt. The doctors couldn't do anything. The priests couldn't do anything. She prayed and her gods were silent. She was utterly discouraged.

But then, one day, she hears about a Jewish rabbi travelling through the neighbourhood. Jesus. She's heard of him time and time again the last couple of years. The Jewish people she knew had been talking about him. He'd been travelling around Galilee restoring sight to the blind, hearing to the deaf, healing the sick, and—most importantly—casting out demons. People said he was the Messiah—a prophet, maybe even the God of Israel himself. People called him the "son of David", the king who would come to sort out all of Israel's problems. Living in such close proximity to Jews, she knew a bit of their story. She knew a little about their God. And as far as she could tell, he wasn't much better than her gods. His people hadn't heard him speak in hundreds of years. He didn't seem to care about his people any more than her gods cared about theirs; they were all living under the boot of Rome, after all, and their gods didn't seem to care. But now the God of Israel was waking up, now he was speaking and acting through this "son of David," this "Messiah", this "Jesus". The God of Israel had—so the Jews claimed—made promises to his people through prophets a thousand years ago. But nothing had come of them and, like everybody else, she had mocked them: "Where's your God?" The Jewish God was no better than theirs and they had no reason to be so uppity. But now those old prophecies were suddenly being fulfilled. Something was happening. Something she couldn't say of her own gods. And so she followed the talk and the rumours until she found this Jesus. If her gods wouldn't help her, maybe the God of Israel would.

Look at Matthew 15, beginning at verse 21.

And Jesus went away from there and withdrew to the district of Tyre and Sidon. And behold, a Canaanite woman from that region came out and was crying, "Have mercy on me, O Lord, Son of David; my daughter is severely oppressed by a demon."

Imagine her excitement when she found him. Jesus and his disciples had a little camp in the country, away from everyone. That made perfect sense. Jews and gentiles didn't mix. From a distance she could see that he was teaching his disciples—talking about something. But she didn't care. She called out to get his attention. His disciples looked, but it was like *he* hadn't heard her. He kept on with his teaching. So she called out again and again. She knew he heard, but he ignored her. Finally, she was right there and she cried out. Matthew puts special stress on the urgency of her cries. "O Lord, have mercy on me. Son of David, deliver my daughter." She knew that as a Canaanite, a gentile, she didn't belong there, even though it was Jesus who had come to her country. If he really was the Messiah of the God of Israel, if he really was the son of David, this Jewish king, he had no more obligation to her than her gods had to Jewish people. But she was desperate. Her gods were silent. Her gods were impotent to help her. What reason did she have to be loyal to them? So she cries out to this man come from the God of Israel. But Matthew says:

But he did not answer her a word.

It's actually Jesus's disciples who acknowledge her presence. And, as she expected, they're annoyed. She should know better. A gentile *and* a woman. She had no business bothering them.

And his disciples came and begged him, saying, "Send her away, for she is crying out after us."

They didn't care about her. They were only interested in hearing Jesus. "Come on, Jesus. Give her what she wants so she'll go away and leave us alone. We want to hear what you have to say." (There's another whole sermon right there, isn't there?) She didn't want to hear that, but I doubt she was surprised. But she expected more of Jesus after all the things she'd heard. She'd even heard how he healed the child or the servant—depending on whom you'd heard it from—of a Roman Centurion. And women were coming to him all the time. Surely Jesus would rebuke his

disciples and have compassion on her. But that's not how Matthew says Jesus responded. Finally he speaks, but even then, he speaks to his friends, not to her. Look at verse 24.

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." And he answered, "It is not right to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs."

Ouch. That doesn't sound right to our ears. Did Jesus really ignore her? And then, when he was *forced* to talk to her, did he really say "No" and call her a dog? There's a reason why this is often said to be one of the "hard sayings" of the New Testament. There is a good explanation and we'll get to it in a bit. Matthew tells us just how persistent she was.

She said, "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table."

I think that's when Jesus finally smiled at her. He wasn't really a jerk. There was a reason for the way he acted. You could say he was testing her. Or, I think more importantly, you could say that this was another of his acted-out prophecies that said more than words ever could about the nature of his ministry and just who he was as the Lord's Messiah. So Jesus, again, finally smiled at her and, Matthew says:

Then Jesus answered her, "O woman, great is your faith! Be it done for you as you desire." And her daughter was healed instantly.

So what's going on here? Some people say that Jesus was tired and overwhelmed with the scope of his ministry. He'd been polite and accommodating with the Centurion—and it's interesting how Matthew tells the two stories in almost exactly the same way and with almost exactly the same words and phrases—but back then Jesus was fresh and enthusiastic, but now he's had two years to realise how hard and hopeless this whole thing was.

The harvest was ripe, but the labourers were few. He'd never make it to everyone in Israel in the time he had. So this time he ignored the woman. His mission was Israel and Israel alone. This gets *part* of it right, but I think there's a better explanation. And, of course, there's the easy explanation of some people today: Jesus was a racist! But that's definitely not the answer.

No. Matthew wrote his Gospel to a Jewish audience and a big part of his purpose was to show that Jesus really was *their* Messiah and that he'd come in fulfilment of *their* prophecies. In doing that, Matthew reminds us that Jesus didn't parachute into history to save humanity and the world at any old random time and place. There's been a tendency in the Church to abstract Jesus' ministry, to separate theology and story, doctrine and history. He *is* the Saviour of the world after all, and so we start thinking that if he'd wanted to he could have come at any time and any place and people to do his saving work, but in doing that we forget that—no—he came and he had to come where and when he did because Jesus is part of a bigger story.

This is why I say that this was sort of a sort of acted-out prophecy. I expect Jesus planned to help this woman from the start, but what he says and does here stresses a point that will be vital to his own people and that, ultimately, will be vital as the gospel goes out from Judea to the whole world. That point is that Jesus reveals or puts on display or proves the faithfulness of the God of Israel. He does that by first ignoring this gentile woman, then he refuses her request and calls her a dog. But maybe the most remarkable thing—and it highlights that he really was a prophet—is that his refusal of her request ends up prompting *her* to speak that vital truth when she says, "But even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from the master's table." Take note: The dogs don't eat until the master's children have eaten. And just so with the gospel. The gentiles can't eat until the children of Israel have first been fed. The Lord must fulfil his promises to his people before those gospel crumbs can fall to

the gentiles. The amazing thing—and what this Canaanite woman probably didn't realise at the time—was that those crumbs that fell under the table would, in time, become a great feast for the nations. But what has drawn the nations to the table was seeing the faithfulness of the Lord to feed his own children, just as the household dogs only came to the table, because they saw the master feeding his children and hoped to eat what was dropped.

We too often forget this. "For God so loved the *world*," we say. But we've forgotten the bigger story of which this is just one part. Not this short story and not even just the story of the gospels, but the *big story*, the story of Israel, the story of the people of God that runs from Genesis to Revelation. We tend to lift Jesus out of his historical and Jewish context, out of his First Century context, which means lifting him out of the story of Israel—which again means lifting him out of the Genesis to Revelation story. What our Gospel today shows us is Jesus *right in the middle of the big story*.

So it's true what Jesus says to the woman here: He did *not* come to the gentiles. Yes, a few gentiles came to him, but Jesus did not come to the gentiles. Jesus came to *Israel*. Jesus is *Israel's* Messiah. "But again," we protest, "God so loved the *world* that he gave his only begotten Son..." Jesus said it. Yes. Jesus brings salvation for all, but we need to first understand that he does so *as Israel's Messiah*. Jesus stresses it right here: "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." And in saying that he is not saying that he came to some of the house of Israel who were lost, but that he came to Israel because Israel—the whole people—was lost. They were sheep without a shepherd.

Jesus came to bring the kingdom that had been promised to Israel through Abraham and through David and he did it to fulfil the Lord's promises—to show his faithfulness. There were aspects of that kingdom that were new and different, but Jesus' kingdom is built firmly and immovably on the covenant

and the promises the Lord had made with Israel down through the ages from Abraham's time. He had called Israel to be his people. He had promised to be their God. He had rescued Israel and set her apart that he might show her his blessings and give her his word and he did it all *so that she could then share that blessing and share that word with the gentile nations*. So that the world would see God in the midst of his people and be moved to come and give him glory. He fully expected crumbs to fall from the table. Remember that Jesus stressed in the Sermon on the Mount that he had come *not* to abolish the law—not to abolish anything God had promised or covenanted or established with Israel—but to *fulfil* it. Jesus didn't come to do away with Israel. Many Christians down through history have said that because of Israel's faithlessness God cast her aside to start over with the gentiles and the Church. Absolutely not! On the other extreme you've got folks who think Jesus' coming put Israel on hold while the Lord saves the gentiles and builds a Church. Some even like to say that Jesus is *not* Israel's Messiah. Eventually, they say, God will be finished with the gentiles, the Church will be completed and then "raptured" out of the world, and the Lord will then pick-up where he left off with Israel. Again, no. Jesus didn't come to abolish the idea of God electing a special people, nor did he come to divide the people of God with Israel on the one hand and the Church on the other. From day one with Abraham God had made clear that his restoration of the world and his restoration of humanity was going to happen through Israel. Israel may have made a lot of mistakes, fallen into idolatry, failed to live the law, failed to be a light to the nations, but the Lord wasn't giving up. The Church isn't "Plan B" implemented when "Plan A", Israel, failed.

The gentiles did (and still do!) need deliverance from sin and death as much as Israel ever did. But again, God's plan was always to work through Israel and so the ministry of the Messiah had first to be for Israel. Israel had misinterpreted the message she'd been

given long before. Some in Israel had even abandoned it almost entirely. And so if Israel was going to be the Lord's means of bringing life to the world, Jesus had first to call her back to the Lord. Not to do so would be for Jesus to deny the Lord's promises and to make a liar out of him. And if the Lord was unfaithful to the promises he made to his own people, what reason would the gentiles ever have to notice him? He'd be no different than their own gods—than Zeus or Isis or Odin or Vishnu or the Great Spirit.

In fact, what we see Jesus doing—and especially so in the middle portion of the Gospels between his birth and his death and resurrection—is taking on the role of Israel himself. In Daniel the Son of Man character represented the people of God, but in Jesus' ministry we see him taking that role on, embodying it himself. In his birth and ministry we see him taking on the role of the great Davidic King. And as his ministry unfolds into rejection, suffering, and death we see him taking on the role of Isaiah's suffering servant. Again, these are roles the prophets ascribed to Israel, but one by one Jesus takes each of them up himself. Brothers and Sisters, understand this key point: Jesus *is* Israel. He embodies her inheritance and her mission. Where Israel had failed to be faithful, Jesus is faithful without fail. Even as he dies, he faces the very same death that the Jewish revolutionaries faced a generation later and for the very same reason: he challenged Rome as King of the Jews. Jesus came as the embodiment of Israel. And he came as Israel to show God's people a new way of being Israel—a new way in which the people would fulfil everything the Lord had ever promised and everything the Lord had ever called Israel to be. This is why Jesus came preaching repentance. The people had to let go of all their misconceptions of what it meant to be God's people, whether that was their hope for violent revolution or their hope that if they were obedient enough the Lord would finally send the Messiah to rain down fire and brimstone on the gentiles and usher in the kingdom. As the promises were fulfilled in Jesus it did not nullify God's plan to bring life

to the world through Israel. What it did was reorient Israel around Jesus himself—it forged a *new* Israel, not based on blood and genealogy, not based on circumcision or sabbath-keeping, but on faith—specifically faith in Jesus the Messiah. Israel had been born as a people when they followed the Lord in faith through the waters of the Red Sea and were rescued from Egypt. In Jesus Israel is born again. But this new Israel is born of all those who follow Jesus in faith through the waters of baptism. Jesus offered a choice. As he fulfilled the covenant those who repented and reoriented their lives in and around him—those who found their lives in him—became part of the new way of being Israel, centred in Jesus. But, Jesus warned, those who rejected him and refused him would be cut off—and when he said that he was speaking to the biological children of Abraham. The axe was set to the root of the tree. The branches that refused to bear good fruit would be cut off. Jerusalem, embodying and representing faithless Israel, would be and was judged, torn stone from stone, and scattered—again, the Lord revealing his faithfulness to his promises, even in judgement.

But through Jesus, Israel would continue in a new way—with the law no longer on tablets of stone, but written on her heart, with the Spirit of God no longer residing in a stone temple behind a curtain they could never pass, but actually living inside them—making them the temple themselves. And as the Spirit changed and renewed and brought to life the law of love now written on their hearts, this new Israel would not only fulfil the Lord's promises through the prophets, but it would also finally fulfil the Lord's mission for his people—reaching out to the nations and bringing his life to the world. So, yes, Jesus came to bring life to the world—to Jew and gentile alike—but to fulfil the Lord's plan he brought this life by first bringing it to the old Israel, to Abraham's children. To do anything else would have been to bypass the Lord's plan and to make a liar of him. To make him no better than the pagan gods.

This faithfulness of God to his promises—what we call the “righteousness of God”—is the theme of St. Paul’s epistle to the Romans. Through that letter Paul explains how God has been faithful to and how he has fulfilled his covenant promises to Israel and at the end, in Romans 15 he sums it all up, writing:

For I tell you that Christ became a servant to the circumcised [that means Israel—Abraham’s biological children] to show God’s truthfulness, in order to confirm the promises given to the patriarchs, and in order that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy. As it is written,

“Therefore I will praise you among the Gentiles, and sing to your name.” (Romans 15:8-9)

Jesus fulfilled God’s promises to Israel so that when the story of Israel and the Lord’s faithfulness to her—especially his faithfulness in Jesus the Messiah—was proclaimed to the gentiles they would—*we* would—fall before God in worship of his great mercy. This is the story the first Jewish Christians proclaimed to the gentiles. This story of the faithfulness of God was the story St. Paul proclaimed as he travelled the Roman empire. It’s the story—ultimately proved true at the cross and the empty tomb and in the pouring out of the Spirit at Pentecost—it’s the story that reveals the faithfulness of the God of Israel. It’s the story that reveals the gods of this world to be cheap and impotent imitations of the one true God and it’s the story that reveals all the kings of the earth to be but cheap imitations of Jesus, the one true Lord. And as the gentiles heard this story, they put their faith in Jesus, they were baptised into his body, and as they found their life in him—the true embodiment of Israel and the fulfilment of God’s promises to her—as they found their life in Jesus the gentiles were grafted into this new Israel.

It’s often a contentious point today in some circles, but the story we’ve inherited, the story told from Genesis to Revelation makes it clear that Israel is

the Church and the Church is Israel and Jesus stands at the centre-point, at the bridge between them. The Jewish root that was Israel, even as it was cut down for failing to bear fruit, it gave birth to Jesus the Messiah who is now the trunk of a tree that branches out to the entire world. Anyone who may—Jew or gentile—can take part in the life of Jesus. All any of us needs to do is take hold of him in faith, trusting that in his death he has forgiven our sins and in his resurrection has given us life. Both literally and metaphorically, Jesus provides the blood to make us Israel. All we need is faith.

Faith like we see in the Canaanite woman in today’s Gospel. How much did she know about Israel and Israel’s God and Israel’s Messiah? Probably very little. I suspect she had no idea just how profound her response to Jesus about crumbs falling to the dogs was or just how much it revealed about Israel’s calling—and through that Jesus’ calling. I suspect it was all providence. And we don’t know what happened to her after her daughter was healed and she went home. But I have to think that when the good news of Jesus’ death and resurrection spread throughout Palestine, everything about that conversation with Jesus came into razor-sharp focus and she believed—not just in a travelling miracle-worker, a travelling prophet, but in Jesus the Messiah who brought life to the world and who changed *everything*, because the God of Israel so loved *everyone*. She believed, because in Jesus she had met the one true God and he exposed everything, every god she’d ever believed in to be but a poor mockery of the God who is faithful. And, in that, she was no longer a dog. She began by eating the crumbs, but was—I expect—suddenly surprised to find herself feasting at the Lord’s table, a beloved daughter of the King, now part of that great story herself.

And just so with each of us, Brothers and Sisters. We have heard the good news about Jesus. The cross and the empty tomb have shown us the faithfulness of God and we have believed. He welcomes us to his Table

this morning, we who once were not worthy so much as to gather the crumbs his children dropped, we who were once dogs, he now invites to feast as his children. Here at the Table we see the faithfulness of the God of Israel revealed in Jesus. Here we see that he and he alone is worthy of our glory and praise. Here we’re reminded, if we have been tempted to flirt with the false gods and false kings and false ideologies and systems of the world, to put them aside as the gospel once again shows them up as worthless in the light of the one true God. And here again, we are exhorted to go out and to proclaim the cross and the lordship of Jesus, the good news to the world so that one day the knowledge of his glory will fill it as the waters cover the sea.

Let’s pray: Heavenly Father, we thank you for the gift of faith by which we have been grafted into your Son, Jesus, and in him grafted into your people, Israel. We were stones, but by the gift of faith you have made us children of Abraham. We were dead wood, but by faith you have grafted us into the living vine and caused us to bear fruit. We were mangy, unclean dogs, but now you have made us your sons and daughters. Strengthen that gift of faith in us we ask, that as we live in hope of your future we would live in such a way, bearing the fruit of the Holy Spirit and using the gifts you have given us, to proclaim your glory. Strengthen our faith and enrich our ministry that we might be the blessing to the nations you have called us to be, holding high the light of Christ and proclaiming boldly that Jesus is Lord. Amen.