



LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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A Sermon for the Second Sunday in Lent St. Matthew 15:21-28 & 1 Thessalonians 4:1-8 Fr. William Klock

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In today's Gospel St. Matthew tells us that Jesus and his disciples left Jewish Galilee for the district of Tyre and Sidon. While there were plenty of Jews living in the district of Tyre and Sidon, this was Canaanite country—pagan country—outside the bounds of Israel. I expect they kept themselves to the countryside and away from the cities crowded with unclean gentiles. That, and Mark's telling of this story suggests Jesus was taking a little bit of a holiday from the crowds that followed him everywhere in Galilee. So Jesus and the disciples found a quiet place to stay, but there's no peace and quiet for Jesus. Last week the devil found him on his forty-day retreat in the wilderness. Now a local Canaanite woman hears he's in the neighbourhood and tracks him down to the place where they were staying. As Matthew remembers it, he writes that:

A Canaanite woman from those parts came out and shouted, "Have pity on me, Lord, son of David! My daughter is in a bad way...she's demon-possessed!"

Remembering what happened that day and how Jesus and how he and the other disciples responded to her, Matthew tells us that **Jesus said nothing at all to her**. And for their part, the disciples prodded Jesus saying, **Send her away! She's shouting after us**.

These are the same disciples that shooed away the little children when they approached Jesus, so their reaction doesn't seem very surprising or out of character. After all, they were here to get away from all the people and here's this pagan, gentile woman shouting at

them. It probably does seem a little odd, however, that Jesus would ignore the woman. But writing decades later about what happened that day, if we listen closely, we do get a sense of how the gospel had softened Matthew's heart. Back then she was just an annoying gentile disturbing their day. But looking back, Matthew describes her plight with compassion. Her daughter was in a bad way, he says. That's how he usually describes the hurting people who came to Jesus for mercy. Her daughter, the woman cried out, was demon-possessed. A terrible thing. And yet the key to the story is in Matthew's detail that she was a Canaanite.

That's the problem. Think about how we often struggle to feel compassion for people who put themselves in bad situations or do dumb and irresponsible things and then suffer the consequence. Play with fireworks and you might blow your fingers off. Do drugs and you'll end up a junkie strung out on the street. Sleep around and you'll end up with an STD. Lie with the dogs and you'll get up with fleas. We have various ways of describing this. "Play stupid games; win stupid prizes" comes to mind. The Bible has a saying too: You reap what you sow. Most Jews would look at this Canaanite woman with a demon-possessed daughter with that kind of attitude. If you worship false gods—remember that Paul says those false gods are just demons in disguise—if you worship false gods, it's your own fault if you or your children end up possessed by demons. You reap what you sow.

One of the patron gods of Sidon was Eshmun, a Phoenician god of healing. He had a great temple in the city. I expect that this woman had taken her daughter there many times to pray to the idol there and to offer it sacrifices in the hope that it would heal her daughter. Little did she know that her worship of this demonic false god was just the sort of thing that brought demonic possession on her daughter. No wonder she didn't get better. But now she's heard about Jesus. Even people in her pagan country were talking about him. She heard her Jewish neighbours tell how he had delivered people from demons. She also heard them say that Jesus was the Messiah, the son of David,

that somehow, through him or in him or something like that, the God of Israel had come to visit and deliver his people. She'd never prayed to the God of Israel before. That would be dumb. She was a Canaanite. She wasn't his problem. She had her own gods. Plus, from her perspective, the God of Israel couldn't be any better than her gods. His people hadn't heard him speak for hundreds of years. And he allowed them to be oppressed by the Romans. He didn't sound very powerful—or even very present. Gentiles like her mocked the faith that the Jews put in him. "Where's your God?" they jeered. But as she listened to the stories about Jesus, it sounded like the God of Israel was finally waking up. Through this "son of David", through this "Messiah", the promises he had made centuries before were starting to come true. If her gods wouldn't help her, maybe she should go and find this Jesus. Yahweh wasn't her god or even the god of her people, but maybe in Jesus he would show her mercy. And so she went looking for Jesus and when she found him, there he was talking with his friends. She decided it was best to be respectful. Jews—especially rabbis—avoided contact with gentiles. They thought people like her were unclean. Plus she was a woman and it wasn't appropriate for a woman to be too forward with a man who wasn't family. And so she called out from a distance. Again, Matthew writes: **Have pity on me, Lord, son of David!**

And to her dismay—although I doubt she was surprised—Jesus ignored her. But that wasn't going to stop her. Maybe if she could annoy him enough, he'd just give her what she wanted. That's more or less how the pagans thought it worked with the gods. Think of our Ash Wednesday gospel and Jesus' warning about heaping up words with long prayers. That's what the gentiles do, he warns. So she cries out some more at which point the disciples, who had been ignoring her so far, turn to Jesus and plead with him: **Send her away! She's shouting after us**. And finally Jesus responds—but to them, not to her. Matthew says that Jesus answered, **I was only sent to the lost sheep of the house of Israel**.

Ouch. Where's all that "For God so loved the world that he sent his only-begotten son" stuff that Jesus says in John's Gospel? Well, we'll come back to that. But first, now that Jesus has acknowledged her presence if not actually spoken directly to her, the woman feels comfortable drawing nearer and speaking to Jesus. Matthew says that **she came and threw herself down at his feet. "Lord, she said, "please help me." And Jesus answered, "It isn't right to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs."**

Wait. Did Jesus just call her a dog? But Jesus is just making a point. He's reiterating what was the normal, common view that Jews had of gentiles. They were "dogs". There were two types of people in the world: Jews. And everyone else who wished they were a Jew. At least that's sort of how the Jews saw things. The Jews were God's people: chosen, called, especially loved. They were the people who lived with the living God in their midst. Or, at any rate, they used to be...and they were sure they would be once again. That was the difference. The gentiles, they were unchosen, unclean, and unloved. They worshipped idols and they did evil things. They were dogs. And when they talked about dogs, the weren't talking about cute little lap dogs or friendly pets. They were talking about feral dogs that roamed the streets at night eating garbage. That's how Jews saw gentiles. In contrast, they were the Lord's beloved children.

And the woman understands all of this. She already knew she had no right to be there. She had no claim on the God of Israel or his Messiah. **I know, Lord,** she says to Jesus, **but even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from the master's table.**

I expect Jesus finally smiled when he heard that. He wasn't really a jerk. He said and did all of this for a reason. It was another one of his acted prophecies that said more about his mission and his ministry than words ever could. So having made his point, **Jesus replied, "O woman, great is your faith! Let it**

be as you wish. And Matthew adds, **And her daughter was healed from that moment.** Maybe Matthew just knew that this is what happened because this is what always happened, but I suspect that the report got back to Jesus and the disciples. Maybe the woman brought her healed daughter to meet Jesus. Who knows. The point is that this woman saw the God of Israel at work in Jesus, she came in faith, and even though she had no claim on him, the God of Israel healed her daughter.

But back the question: Why would Jesus treat this woman this way? Why would he call her a dog? What's with all this about not giving the children's bread to the dogs? Didn't God so love the *world* that he sent his son? He did. But here's the thing: remember that Matthew wrote his Gospel for a Jewish audience and a big part of his agenda was to show them 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 jump 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 any people to do his saving work, but in doing that we forget that—no—he came and he had to come where and when and to whom he did because Jesus is part of a bigger story. Jesus of Montréal couldn't have saved the world. Jesus of Nazareth—*because he was Jesus of Nazareth*—could.

This is why I say that this was sort of an 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. And that point is that *Jesus reveals 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, Brothers and Sisters, 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 couldn't have realised 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 beloved children and hoped to eat what was dropped.

We too often forget this. It's true that "God so loved the *world*". But we've forgotten the bigger story of which this is just one part: 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. And when we do that, we lose the very thing brought—that still brings—the nations to Jesus: the great theme of the faithfulness, the righteousness of God. But Matthew won't let us do that. Today he shows us 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. 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."

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 so that he might show her his blessings and give her his word and he did it *so that the world, the nations, the gentiles would see God in the midst of his people and be moved to come and give him glory.* And that's exactly what Matthew wants us to see happening in our Gospel today.

We don't know exactly what this Canaanite woman had heard or what she knew. There were enough Jews living in her part of the world that she might very well have known their stories and have heard about their prophets. Knowing those things made it all the easier to mock the faith of the Jews. They told these stories of past greatness. They told stories about Abraham being led across the desert by their God. They told stories about their deliverance from slavery in Egypt—about the plagues and the Red Sea—about the law given to Moses on Mt. Sinai. They told stories about how the Lord had conquered the land of Canaan for them. And the Canaanites laughed: "Where's your God now?" Because the God of Israel wasn't in the temple anymore. He hadn't spoken in centuries—if he had ever really spoken at all. The stories were probably all made up anyway. Consider that these pagans had their own stories about their own gods. And, yes, the God of Israel was so much better in Israel's stories. He was just and righteous and loving. Their gods were fickle and capricious and subject to all their passions. You couldn't trust them, which is why they heaped up long prayers. But their gods didn't speak and, as far as they could tell, neither did the God of Israel.

But then, he did speak and he did act. The first gentiles to notice were the wise men from the East. The God of Israel placed a star in the sky that guided them to his king, to his Messiah. And as Jesus travelled around Galilee healing the sick, the lame, the blind, the deaf, and the demon possessed. As Jesus preached good news and coming judgement, it got the attention of some of the gentiles. There was that Roman centurion in Capernaum who went to Jesus to plead for the life of his son. There was the demoniac in the Decapolis. Jesus had cast his demons into a herd of pigs and now he was healed, sane, and proclaiming what the God of Israel had done. And now this Canaanite woman. She'd heard what the God of Israel was doing through Jesus. In a world of idolatrous and demon-filled darkness, she had a glimpse of the light, and so she came to Jesus in faith—faith that this foreign God whom she'd once mocked, just might actually be for real and unlike any of the other gods her people had ever known. And through Jesus the God of Israel healed her daughter, drove the darkness away, and sent her home with her faith confirmed.

Brothers and Sisters, the Canaanite woman, responding to that little glimpse of God's light in the midst of the darkness, prefigures what God knew would happen with the gentiles once the light of his righteousness, his faithfulness began to blaze out from the cross and from the empty tomb. This was his plan all along. Because he loved the whole world, he sent his son take up the identity and mission of his people, Israel. Through Jesus—and especially in his death and resurrection and through the judgement that Jesus brought to Judea—the God of Israel fulfilled the promises that he had made to his people. And in those events, he made his glory known to the gentiles. In Jesus, the gentiles saw a God unlike any god they had ever known: a God who speaks, a God who acts, a God who is present with his people, and most of all a God who is faithful and just. And they abandoned their false gods, their demonic idols and through Jesus they bowed down, they submitted in faith,

they gave their allegiance to the God of Israel. And in that, God gathered the dogs and made them his children. He took what was unclean, and washed it pure. As Paul writes in our Epistle today: **God did not call us to uncleanness, but to holiness.** By putting his glory on full display in Jesus, he has taken us away from our idols and our idolatry and made us holy. Brothers and Sisters, the Canaanite woman is us—or the vast majority of us, at any rate. An unclean, gentile dog now washed clean and made holy by Jesus, because we have seen the glory of God shining forth from him—from his cross, from his empty tomb, and from his ascension. Our ancestors believed and we believe, because the good news about Jesus outshines every god, every demon, every philosophy, every ism, every idol. And, Brothers and Sisters, my prayer is that—particularly during this season of Lenten fasting—that God by his word and by his Spirit would hold his glory before us and drive away all the distractions that we've let creep back into our view, that his glory would drive away every idol, whether that be worldly thinking, selfishness, politics, money, sex, entertainment—whatever our distractions might be and that we would fix our gaze and our grip solely on Jesus, the glory of his Father, and the life of his Spirit and that we would remember that he has delivered us from uncleanness and called us to holiness.

Let's pray: Gracious Father, as you revealed your righteous glory to the Canaanite woman through Jesus, let your glory blaze forth as we recall the good news of Jesus' death, resurrection, and ascension. Keep the gospel ever before us so that as we see your great glory, everything else, every idol, every false source of hope and security pales in comparison. Cause us to let go of everything that we might hold tightly to you and you alone. Through Jesus we pray. Amen.