

St John the Baptist, Crowthorne

Sunday 16th August 2020

10 am: Holy Communion

Year A

10th after Trinity/ Proper 15

Theme: Spiritual seekers

Readings: Isaiah 56:1, 6-8

Romans 11:1-2a, 29-32

Matthew 15:21-28 (short version)

Sources: Bruggemann et. al, *A Lectionary Commentary – Year A*
Jack McArdle, *And that's the Gospel truth - Year A*
Kitchen, et. al, *WORD of Promise – Year A*

Demand for puppies soared during lockdown as people sought canine companions and prices doubled. My brother's family can be added to this statistic, although it was not a lockdown whim, my brother had already been browbeaten into agreeing to a family pet. So, Jarvis, the Cocker Spaniel, joined the family and made himself at home. 10 points if you get the play on the name. I'm not known for being a dog lover, but this hyperactive ball of fur even managed to win me over when they visited on Friday.

Many see dogs as endearing and dog owners find that they quickly become part of the family, however, to call a person a "dog" is another matter altogether. It is a degrading insult. So, what exactly was Jesus doing referring to the Canaanite woman as a "dog" in our gospel reading today??

The Canaanite woman's encounter with Jesus is exasperating. She had seized the opportunity to appeal in person to Jesus to heal her daughter. However, initially Jesus does not answer her at all and then when he does his response appears brusque and unkind.

To put this episode in context, we need to recognize that this is a story told by Matthew from a Jewish point of view. The woman is a Canaanite. The Canaanites were one of the nations the Israelites drove from the promised land when they conquered it under Joshua. Jews were supposed to be set apart from them. The woman acknowledges Jesus' Jewish status by addressing him as "Son of David", as a mark of reverence for who he was.

But Jesus ignores her. The disciples become annoyed by her persistence and want him to send her away and he seems to agree with them when he says, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." Jesus ministry is first and foremost to the Nation of Israel, the Jewish people. It is only after his death and resurrection that the door is thrown wide open to the non-Jewish world. Before that time, we just catch glimpses of God's all-inclusive intentions. Jesus' apparent reluctance to respond to the Canaanite woman highlights the priority of the Jews.

This gets to the heart of the story. The Canaanite woman gets the attention that she, as a non-Jewish mother needs. She wasn't going to take "no" for an answer. First, she is persistent. She refuses to be deterred either by Jesus' reluctance or by the disciples' irritation. She perseveres in her conviction that Jesus can fulfil her request.

But she is not only persistent; she is free of pretension. She comes and kneels before Jesus, imploring him. Jesus uses a harsh metaphor for the woman as a non-Jew that we cannot easily dismiss. The term "dogs," was regularly applied to Gentiles. In this instance, however, Matthew did not record the generic word for dogs but a softer form of the word suggesting dogs living with the family as pets. Even though, it is hardly an endearing label and the woman has every right to take offense. But the woman reacts with a witty retort, indicating that she is beyond recrimination: "Yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table." She is willing to wear the label as long as she can get food from the table. In effect, she accepts her secondary status as an outsider, a Gentile, but takes the risk of remaining a petitioner.

Jesus commends her spirit as evidence of faith and finally comments, "Woman, great is your faith!" He promptly heals her daughter. There is no touching or dramatic action. Jesus simply speaks the word. Love for her daughter drives the Canaanite woman to overcome every barrier to

save her and that finds a response in the heart of Jesus. The woman's faith and persistence held out in a situation where she might have been easily intimidated. She is someone who has enough faith, hope and love to enable her to keep going and not give up until the miracle happens. The Canaanite woman becomes a model voice from beyond the boundaries who stakes her claim on the mercy and generosity of God. She prompts Jesus' ministry to cross ethnic borders, an action that anticipates the wider Christian mission to the whole world. As an outsider, she grasps what the disciples haven't yet understood – that the good news also belongs to the outsiders. This is reflected in the vision in Isaiah of all nations coming to Jerusalem to worship God.

No one stands outside of the generosity of God.

No matter who you are, whether you feel you fit in or not.

God's mercy is available to all.

We live in interesting times, spiritually speaking. The pandemic has led to increased spiritual searching. The volume of people accessing online worship has been surprising and encouraging. Of course, a lot of contemporary questing is more individualised as opposed to subscribing wholesale to institutional religion. But people are recognising that the material world and satisfactions has its limits and flaws. There is a deeper longing to be met and there are answers to be found in the Christian story. May we be unafraid to engage with the spiritual seekers we meet, virtually or face to face, and to petition God on their behalf.

A prayer by Brother Roger of Taizé to conclude:

O Christ,
Tirelessly you seek out those who are looking for you
and who think that you are far away;
teach us at every moment,
to place our spirits into your hands.
While we are still looking for you,
already you have found us.
However poor our prayer,
you hear us far more than we can imagine or believe.

Amen