

Sermon, 19th August 2026, Revd. James Shakespeare

*I'm preaching on our Gospel, Mark 15.21-28, the healing of the Canaanite woman's daughter
+ I invite you to enter into the story, with your imagination.*

Nothing can hold back the brave woman, from Canaan. Not religious boundaries, nor gender rules, nor ethnicity, when she told him the needs of her precious child... Dear Lord, give us faith, like this unswerving woman. Make us stubborn, fearless. Bold, creative. Whatever it takes. Let us hear, 'O great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.'

Amen

In our Gospel Jesus is at a crossroads... just as our world is so often at a crossroads today. And the question is, do we allow the grace of God – the healing food of the Gospel – to extend more & more; or do we restrict it to the few - those 'like us'?

It is, undoubtedly, one of the more unusual of Jesus' encounters & acts of healing – the Canaanite woman's faith (otherwise known, in Mark, as the Syro-Phoenician woman's faith).

It comes within a context of increasing opposition from the Pharisees, for whom Jesus is pushing the boundaries of acceptable religious practise.

And here Jesus seems to push the boundaries even further, by travelling beyond the Pale, and opening himself up to encounter with hated enemies, who shared neither the faith nor the favoured status of their Jewish neighbours. How easy it would have been for Jesus to stayed on the correct side of the border, avoiding contamination by the much-maligned Canaanites?

But what do we make of his banter with this troubled woman, desperate for her daughter to be healed? Doesn't it sound as if Jesus is being as dismissive & discriminatory as his disciples when he says to her:-

'It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs'? Ouch. I'm not sure I'd have wanted to be called a dog - a racist form of abuse, if ever there was one. It seems a pretty un-Jesus like thing for Jesus to have said, doesn't it?

Let's look beyond the surface, however – just as Jesus challenges the religious leaders to look beyond their outward rituals – and see what's really going on, and what God might be saying to us.... <Pause>

What looks, on first reading, as racist (calling the Canaanites 'dogs') is actually turned around. Jews and Canaanites had a long history, and each had colloquial terms of reference for each other; and one can imagine that the Canaanite term for Jews would have been just as bad.

But perhaps Jesus' banter with the woman is actually playful and in part humorous – if only one could read the body language! – cleverly drawing out the woman's boldness, including her brilliant response ('Yes, Lord, even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table'). Words which we still use today: 'We are not worthy to gather up the crumbs from under thy table.'

In a society in which women didn't even speak to men, a woman is heard. A foreign woman, who had the temerity to speak to Jesus, is offered salvation. +Remember this story

comes soon after Feeding 5,000, when Jesus fed the crowd, out of their meagre resources – so that there were 12 baskets of crumbs left over. So, yes, there is enough bread for this foreigner too.

So Jesus' challenge to the Scribes to look beyond externals, which – in their case – confined religious life to paying lip service to the tradition of the Torah, is extended to include not only true faithfulness to God, in the heart, but also a recognition that God's grace isn't just for the chosen few, it's for everyone: even despised Canaanites. After all this woman clearly recognises who Jesus is, when she cries out, 'Have mercy on me, Son of David...'

Today we come to receive the eucharist – the Body of Christ – the bread of life, God's living bread. And we open ourselves to receive what God yearns to give us & our world, in its our need. Just as the Canaanite woman did + those present at the Feeding of the multitude.

But today we're also challenged, by God's word, to recognise that the eucharist, the Gospel – Christ himself – is not just for the few, but for the many. Will we allow the grace of God – the healing food of the Gospel, and the reach of his kingdom – to extend to more and more, in desperate need of it today; or will we play it safe, and restrict it to ourselves, and those are like us?

And it's a question and a challenge – which Jesus confronts us with, through this decisive encounter - relevant to all levels of our common life, as Christians, as a nation, and as a world today...

So let me leave you, as we celebrate this Canaanite woman's faith, and as we dare to bring our own needs & yearnings to Jesus – with some questions...

- **How do we, as a parish, continue to direct our efforts and resources to the proclamation of the Gospel**, to be *"a transforming Christian presence* to all who live, work & visit here, whatever their culture?
- **How do we, as Christians, take courage to share the Gospel, the bread of life, by word and deed, in our everyday lives?** Do we stay within our comfort zones, or do make a difference?.
- **+What about our world? Do we work together**, to overcome injustice + to meet the needs of those devastated by tragedy or natural disaster (in Middle East, L. American & sub-Saharan African) – witnessing to God's provision for all; or do we settle for what make us feel safe?

Let us pray. Lord, thank you for the Canaanite woman's faith; thank you that, despite the protestations of the disciples, you held her gaze; thank you that in healing her child, you crossed boundaries, and showed us that your grace – your living Bread – is available for all who seek you. Feed us, Lord, with your living word, and challenge us to go out, and extend your Kingdom to more and more. **Amen**