

Kia ora koutou

Our Gospel reading from Matthew this morning is entitled “The Faith of a Canaanite Woman”, and my immediate thoughts on this were who is she?! What did it mean when she said to Jesus: “Lord, Son of David”? Why is being a Canaanite significant? Why were the disciples dismissive of her? Why did Jesus seem to refer to her as a dog? And what was it about her faith that Jesus commended her saying: “Woman, you have great faith!”. So much packed in to just 8 verses!

The Gospel of Mark 7 also gives us this account, saying she was a Greek, born in Syrian Phoenicia, which is north and west of the land of Galilee. The Gospels say Jesus was in the vicinity of the cities of Tyre and Sidon. Sidon is in Syrian Phoenicia; in other words, Jesus was in her homeland.

Of course, Canaan spanned the land that God promised the Israelites, and after the Israelites crossed the Jordan river 40 years after leaving Egypt, the Israelite tribes conquered Canaan. The Canaanites were not a single unified nation, but a collection of independent city-states. The area of land that was later known as Phoenicia in Jesus time, was given to one of the twelve tribes of Israel, the Tribe of Asher. Phoenicia does not exist anymore, in current day it is split between Lebanon, Syria and Israel.

In summary, Jesus was in the province of Phoenicia, north and west of Galilee, which was historically part of Canaan before being conquered by Israel after crossing the Jordan from Egypt. And the home of many Canaanites in Jesus' time.

Now of course, even before the Israelites had crossed the Jordan, God had commanded the complete destruction of the Canaanites because of moral corruption, including idolatry, ritual prostitution, and child sacrifice. The Israelites were repeatedly warned by God not to adopt Canaanite religious practices, but they frequently intermingled and fell into worshipping Canaanite gods like Baal and Asherah. It's obvious that the Israelites did not kill or drive out all the Canaanites as God directed.

Anyway, that's where ancient history ends, and this is where a new history emerges! But it's against this historical backdrop of Canaan and Israel that we find this Canaanite woman, desperately kneeling before Jesus asking for healing for her daughter, the disciples not please with her presence, and Jesus challenging her. Wow!

By the way, I've read a few commentaries, trying to understand what Jesus was meaning when he referred to the woman or gentiles, as dogs. While dogs were not officially unclean to the Jewish people, they were regarded with some distaste and impure. Paraphrasing from Expositor's Greek Testament commentary: It is suggested that Jesus wasn't talking about scavenging wild dogs, but more likely referring to family household dogs. And there is the suggestion that Jesus was initiating an argument, inviting further discussion, and perhaps even taking a playful or humorous bantering tone, to be taken with a grain of salt.

But hey, let's not get distracted by dogs!

This is a beautiful account of persistence, courage, unwavering and simple faith, from a gentile woman, despised, and without standing.

What's remarkable is that when she said: “Lord, Son of David”, it is accepted by scholars that this is a title, and is specifically reserved for the Messiah! And her kneeling before Jesus was acknowledgement and submission to him as king. What faith indeed! She recognises Jesus as the Messiah and king.

In the next chapter of Matthew, chapter 16, we find the Pharisees and Sadducees colluding and demanding that Jesus shows them a sign of his authority; so, they didn't recognise the Messiah in their presence. And then further in Matthew 16 we find Jesus asking his disciples who they think he is, with apparently only Peter recognising that Jesus is the Messiah, and Jesus saying to Peter: “Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by flesh and blood, but by my Father in heaven”.

The Canaanite woman believed that Jesus was who he said he was. Believing in Jesus' lordship and mercy, regardless of what the Israelites thought of the Canaanites. I can imagine the disgust and disbelief from the Pharisees and Sadducees, that Jesus would even engage with her, let alone heal her daughter!

It's no wonder that Jesus said "Woman, you have great faith!" She clearly had been shown the truth of who Jesus was by the Lord.

And there is of course a parallel story; the Faith of the Centurion in Matthew 8 and Mark 7. A Roman centurion's servant was near death and so the centurion sent some elders of the Jews to ask Jesus to heal his servant. The elders pleaded with Jesus, and commended the centurion as a good man.

Jesus was not far from the house when the centurion sent friends to say to him: "Lord, don't trouble yourself, for I do not deserve to have you come under my roof. That is why I did not even consider myself worthy to come to you. But say the word, and my servant will be healed. For I myself am a man under authority, with soldiers under me. I tell this one, 'Go,' and he goes; and that one, 'Come,' and he comes. I say to my servant, 'Do this,' and he does it." When Jesus heard this, he was amazed at him, and turning to the crowd following him, he said, "I tell you, I have not found such great faith even in Israel." Then the men who had been sent returned to the house and found the servant well.

Another case of a despised gentile, in this case a hardened professional soldier from the Roman occupying force in the Holy Land. It does sound like he may have been well regarded by some Jews, but we don't really know. But, like the Canaanite woman, this centurion believed that Jesus was who he said he was. He believed in Jesus' lordship and his mercy, regardless of what the Israelites thought of the Roman occupiers! What great strength he had to overcome those voices around him, and to approach Jesus with boldness and humility.

What simple faith, just believing that Jesus is who he says he is, revealed by the Lord to a gentile and by most accounts, an enemy to Israel.

The crazy thing is that after the story of the Canaanite woman and the miracle of her daughter's healing, Jesus ministers to a great crowd on a mountainside near the Sea of Galilee, healing all who came to him, and feeds 4,000 men, plus woman and children with seven loaves and a few fish. And yet, the Pharisees and Sadducees still did not believe. The truth of Jesus' identity was hidden from them.

So what does this mean for us today?

I'm sure Jesus was speaking to us when he said to the disciple Thomas, who asked for proof that he was the risen Christ in John 20:29, "Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed."

"Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed."

The Lord knows each of us intimately, down to each hair on our head. He knows exactly what words he needs to say to us to help or comfort us. He knows how to grab our attention and to reveal himself to us; be it a sign, a dream, a miracle, a word. He alone gives us the gift of faith and reveals himself to us.

All of you here today, and all those who read and listen to the word of God, do so because you believe Jesus is the Messiah, the redeemer, our saviour, the creator of all things. This has been revealed to you by the Lord.

Despite being raised in a Christian home, the son of Anglican ministry parents, Jesus did not reveal himself to me until I was in my early twenties. Our faith journeys are different, but regardless, like the Canaanite woman and the Roman centurion, our faith in Jesus has been personally revealed to us by the Lord. But that revelation is most often assisted by the efforts of our Christian brothers and sisters through love, friendship, and teaching.

So perhaps in our quiet time with the Lord, we can dare to ask the Lord that we be a part of his mission, to help bring the good news of the gospel to a desperate world around us, to a friend, a colleague or a stranger?

God bless