

Sunday 16 August – Eleventh Sunday after Trinity

Sermon by Harold Toms

An audio recording of the sermon from St Luke's will be available after the service at [Sermons \(tk-tiptree-braxted-benefice.org.uk\)](http://Sermons(tk-tiptree-braxted-benefice.org.uk)

Our Gospel reading this morning is one that many people have found quite troubling. Jesus is apparently rude and dismissive to a Canaanite woman who comes to Him seeking healing for her daughter. Initially Jesus ignores her completely then, when she continues to urge her cause, becoming so annoying that the disciples ask Him to send her away, Jesus uses language that is surely insulting to her, effectively calling her a dog. Without any context this would indeed be a very difficult story to understand, seemingly at odds with our normal mental picture of a compassionate and kind Jesus. Fortunately, the compilers of the lectionary do give us the context for the incident and our passage this morning begins with the conclusion of a dispute that Jesus had been having with a group of Jews called the Pharisees.

The Pharisees were an ultra-strict group who believed in a very rigid application of the law, every "i" dotted and "t" crossed. This extended to their attitude to anyone who was not a Jew. All Gentiles could have no part in the promise made through Abraham to God's chosen people, the heirs of Abraham. The Pharisees had approached Jesus to ask why His disciples broke the tradition concerning ritual cleanliness when they ate. After pointing out to them that they themselves failed to follow the law, and not just some obscure part of the law but actually one of the ten commandments, Jesus then called the crowd together to explain that:

"it is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but it is what comes out of the mouth that defiles." Matthew 15:11

He goes on to explain why it is that it is not what goes in to the mouth that defiles a person but rather, what comes out, because what we say expresses the thoughts of our hearts. You cannot stay righteous merely by following the law if within you are evil thoughts and intentions that will, of course, lead to evil actions. Elsewhere in the Gospels, Jesus also deals with the idea that it was somehow sufficient simply to have been born one of God's chosen people, for if those people fail to listen to God's word, that word may be received by others whom God will embrace.

What follows is the story I described at the beginning, Jesus' encounter with a Canaanite woman. That part of the account begins very explicitly with Matthew telling us that Jesus went from the region He was in, Galilee, to a place called "the district of Tyre and Sidon". Matthew's readers would have known immediately that we are no longer in Israel amongst Jewish people, but rather in a place occupied by Gentiles. But Matthew makes this clearer still by telling us that the woman who approaches Jesus and the disciples is a "Canaanite". Now the Canaanites were historically the enemies of the Jews. We know this very well from Old Testament accounts of how the Israelites, led by Moses and then Joshua, came into the promised land and had to take it from the people already living there, the Canaanites, by conquest. It's quite a broad group of peoples that included the Moabites and the Philistines as well as many other tribal groups. So this woman is clearly identified as an enemy of God's chosen people. We should be in no doubt about her, like the Samaritan in the parable, she would have been hated and despised by any right-minded Jew, such as the Pharisees. She could have no share in God's promises.

Initially, as I've said, Jesus ignores her, He doesn't respond at all to her entreaties. But this does not put her off, she gets all the louder, to the extent that the disciples ask Him to send her away. Jesus then does reply, but not to the woman, rather it is to the disciples that He says:

"I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel" Matthew 15:24

Then she comes up to Jesus and does something very strange, she kneels before Him and says very simply "Lord, help me". Jesus' reply must have seemed quite shocking, especially to the disciples, when he responds:

"It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." Matthew 15:26

Her reply shows that, although the Pharisees have not understood Jesus' teachings, although the disciples themselves have not understood, this unnamed Gentile woman has truly understood when she says:

"Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table." Matthew 15:27

Just as God's promise to Abraham was not just to him and his descendants, but a promise that would bless all the nations, so God's

promised Messiah has come to be a blessing both to the Jews and all the nations. Her act of kneeling before Jesus should remind us of other Gentiles who, in Matthew's Gospel, come and kneel before Jesus - the wise men (Magi) who followed a star from the East and knelt before the infant Jesus and His mother. If we go back to the beginning of this story, we should note also how she first addressed Jesus: "Lord, Son of David" (v. 22). It is not until the next chapter in Matthew that one of the twelve (Peter) identifies Jesus as the Messiah, yet here, this un-named Canaanite woman uses His correct Messianic title. She truly knows who Jesus is and, no amount of discouragement will put her off or drive her away. Jesus' words to her are truly telling when He says:

"Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish." Matthew 15:28

Nowhere else in the whole of the New Testament is that expression used: "great is your faith". This, and not Peter's declaration of Jesus as Messiah is the turning point in Matthew's Gospel. It serves much the same purpose as Thomas' declaration of "My Lord and My God." does in John's Gospel. So, I don't find this story to be troubling or challenging. Jesus does show both His love and His compassion in the way He deals with the woman and He uses her great faith to show the disciples, the Pharisees, and indeed us who He really is: God's Messiah sent as a member of the chosen people, fulfilling God's plan, to be a blessing for all humankind.

Amen.