



Praise, Prayer & Preaching sermon

A cry from outside

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Matthew 15:21-28

21 Leaving that place, Jesus withdrew to the region of Tyre and Sidon. **22** A Canaanite woman from that vicinity came to him, crying out, "Lord, Son of David, have mercy on me! My daughter is demon-possessed and suffering terribly." **23** Jesus did not answer a word. So his disciples came to him and urged him, "Send her away, for she keeps crying out after us." **24** He answered, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel." **25** The woman came and knelt before him. "Lord, help me!" she said. **26** He replied, "It is not right to take the children's bread and toss it to the dogs." **27** "Yes it is, Lord," she said. "Even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table." **28** Then Jesus said to her, "Woman, you have great faith! Your request is granted." And her daughter was healed from that very hour.

Over a number of weeks here in the Wesley Theatre, we have been looking at Matthew's Gospel. Before leaving Matthew to explore the Book of Exodus, I want to round off this time by considering a most important part of the gospel.

The passage follows a controversy with some of the Pharisees and scribes (15:1-9). The setting invites a comparison between the two incidents, but we must avoid the temptation to caricature the Pharisees and scribes, which is unhelpful. However, the contrast between religious leaders and one who cries from outside confronts us all and speaks as clearly today as it did in the life of the early Christian community.

One writer reminds us that "his word is not to be emasculated by human rules". It is inner-purity rather than external propriety that pleases God.

The biblical context raises what has been described as a series of difficult and even inappropriate questions. Why does Jesus appear so harsh and almost offensive to this person? Does Jesus do something he didn't want to do? How did a Gentile come to have faith in Jesus as "Son of David"?

These issues are best understood when we see that these are the very questions that the early Christian church was wrestling with—that is the relationship of Jesus Christ and themselves within the surrounding Gentile culture; the reach of Christ to those outside the camp; and what it meant for people without Jewish roots to place their trust in this Saviour?

Before we open up the passage in greater depth, let us consider the comparison between the conflict with the religious leaders and the woman who would be considered socially marginalised.

In the first context, people who were and are socially accepted place great emphasis on external differences and miss the matters of the heart; whereas the woman who is outside breaks through external differences and reaches out for God's mercy.

Let us remind ourselves of the setting in the gospel. In Matthew 14, a new phase in the ministry of Jesus began. John the Baptist is cruelly killed, a great crowd is fed, and Jesus' miraculous powers are displayed. Jesus withdrew for 'space' to spend time with his Father, in order to be ready to face the future. Chapters 14 to 17 seem to be what one writer called 'a foreshadowing of the future' – and, in Matthew 15:21-28, we have what appears to be 'a cry from outside'.

A woman comes with a real concern for her child and, because she has either heard Jesus herself or the news has come through friends, she exercises faith and reaches out for help. Here is someone who can help!

- We have a woman who was an outsider, a Canaanite woman; and she symbolises all those who don't easily fit in or feel accepted in their community.
- She addressed Jesus with a Messianic title, but recognised she was a stranger. It is interesting that the one who is outside the immediate circle actually acknowledged that he was the promised Messiah. The woman addressed Jesus with what will become the language of faith and worship in the Christian community. Such language reflected the way the church worshipped and is adapted from the prayer language of the Psalms.
- Her plea was not on the basis of race or religion, but because she had real needs. This is a strong Wesley Mission message, as we care for people in the name of Jesus Christ, by reaching out beyond our bounds and to all people.

God has a plan for salvation which is offered first to the Jews during his ministry (10:6 and 15:24) and then is broadened to all nations (28:16-20). This account describes how it will come in all its fullness. Eugene Boring points to the fact that it "erupts into the present".

This is a story written from a Jewish point of view. Most of us who read it are non-Jews, so it takes an imaginative leap to appreciate its original impact. Apparently, Jesus is reluctant to respond to the woman (v.23), underscoring the first priority being for Jews, which will now be open to all.

- The biblical account has a powerful social impact. People tended to relate only to an immediate circle of friends or religious grouping. Does this have something to say to us? Far too many religious people within the Christian church have a circle of friends that is almost entirely Christian. We must be prepared to reach out.
- The biblical account reveals an insight into the new reach of the gospel. Jesus' words may appear crude, but the woman persists and is not in any way put off or resentful of the analogy, which would suggest that it is not harsh but part of the language of the day.
- This account asks questions about our witness and mission. Is our vision too narrow and do we need to grasp the power of the Holy Spirit to take us further in our mission as we communicate God's care and compassion? Are we also locked into our own social boundaries or hold to theological presuppositions which count people out, rather than count people in? We must consider this very carefully.

Let's move closer to this encounter with Jesus:

THERE NEED TO BE TIMES OF STRATEGIC WITHDRAWAL –v.21

'Jesus withdrew'—this is in every sense a strategic withdrawal. Jesus had gone North into Gentile territory to gain peace, quiet and refreshment, which was hard to find at home.

- The crowds were always around him ... they wanted to learn from him, hear his wonderful stories and connect with his healing power.
- The Pharisees and other religious leaders are following his every step ... they want to trap him and cause problems.
- A new phase of ministry is beginning for Jesus, which would culminate in the cross where, in death, Jesus reaches out to all the world.

This story is focused not on Jesus taking the mission initiative, but a Gentile woman taking her own initiative, which dramatizes how faith reaches out to the grace that is offered in Christ.

When I think of Christian renewal today, I am bound to note its importance in relation to the whole of life. There is a place for us to 'contemplate' in a deeply devotional sense and to seek God's presence. The need for prayerful reflection has never been more needed than today, and is fundamentally important for each one of us.

At times, we underestimate the important place of spiritual reflection. Such 'space for God' creates a readiness to respond in a much deeper way.

A small boy liked to attend church with his family, except for the long prayers that his minister used during the service; he couldn't understand them and, for a young person, they felt tiresome. Mother and Father invited the minister and his wife for lunch following the service and the minister was asked to pray a blessing over the food.

The boy was surprised by the shortness of the prayer this time. With that earnestness that belongs to eight-year-old boys, he said, "I notice that you don't pray long when you're hungry, do you?"

- We need to find a place of spiritual cultivation ... we cannot healthily contemplate the challenges of life without times of sustenance and growth.
- We need to be encouraged in such a way that our spiritual and human resources are given proper priority. Both are equally necessary to help us engage in our mission for God today.
- Such a place will help us to contemplate the holy life to which God has called us in Jesus Christ.

If Jesus Christ chose to take time out in the midst of his busy ministry, how much more do we need to take time to cultivate our relationship with God? However, the best laid plans that we make are often interrupted and we have to respond as Jesus did – in a way that is gracious and positive.

THE INTERRUPTIONS OF LIFE OFTEN PRESENT THE GREATEST OPPORTUNITIES- v.22.

In the ministry of Jesus, we see the power of the interruption:

- On his way North, Jesus met a Samaritan woman. It was not planned; while sitting at the well, he met a woman in need. Jesus even asked her a question, 'Will you give me a drink?' (John 4:7)
- Jesus was asleep in the stern of the boat, when he was woken by the disciples who were afraid of the storm that was raging around them. 'He got up, rebuked the wind and said to the waves, "Quiet! Be still!" Then the wind died down and it was completely calm.' (Mark 4:39)

- Jesus was on his way to bring healing to an official's daughter, when he was touched by a woman who had been ill for many years with constant bleeding. She was hesitant and came up behind him, merely to touch his garment. It did not prevent him reaching out to her, as he asked, 'Who touched my clothes?' (Mark 5:30) Jesus saw her fear, but also her faith ... because this is what occurred: 'Immediately her bleeding stopped and she felt in her body that she was freed from her suffering.' (5:29)

A test of good living is to keep a clear focus. However, it is also important to be able to handle interruptions—and be able to carry on. We may be so involved in what we believe we should do that we are unable to respond to the unexpected. God calls us to be sufficiently flexible to meet the unplanned challenges of life.

On many occasions Jesus was met by people who approached him for help. Here Jesus is withdrawing and the woman's need is both serious and urgent. It is worth asking, 'What were the options for Jesus by way of his response?'

- Jesus could have said, 'Not now, please, I'm resting.' It would have been a reasonable answer for him to have given.
- Jesus could have said, 'Let's make another arrangement.' In today's terms, he could have got out his iPhone to find a convenient 'window of opportunity', but Jesus would not be diverted from helping her.
- Jesus could have said, 'This is not my responsibility.' In the gospels, Jesus never walks away from situations where there is either a sense of responsibility or an opportunity to demonstrate his care.

The response of Jesus encourages us to consider our mission of care. We are called to engage in the compassionate ministry of Christ—and this reaches to the outsider. I am bound to ask—What time do we have for people in need?

To be able to find the right balance as we reach out to others can be very challenging.

In 1996, much of the city centre of Manchester in the North-West of England was destroyed by a terrorist bomb. There was chaos and devastation; 80,000 people were evacuated from a particular area, but not one person died ... a modern miracle, when you consider the extent of the damage.

The city centre was rebuilt and, on the eve of the Commonwealth Games in 2002, I shared in a Thanksgiving Service in Manchester Cathedral. The Queen attended the service and we heard various readings from scripture, but also from a work by T S Eliot called *The Rock*:

"We build in vain unless the Lord build with us.
Can you keep the City that the Lord keeps not with you?
A thousand policemen directing traffic
Cannot tell you why you come or where you go."

The actor, Tom Courtenay, concluded his reading with:

"O my soul, be prepared for the coming of the Stranger,
Be prepared for him who knows how to ask questions."

The way we respond to strangers is an indication of the genuine nature of our faith and our love of all people. Jesus had a very special concern for and interest in those who did not usually find acceptance from others. This is constantly displayed in his compassionate ministry.

- The interruptions of life ask serious questions; they are never to be seen as unimportant matters. It is all too easy to brush aside the real needs of people.
- The interruptions of life call us to look beyond ourselves; beyond our own small circle of concern to the interests and needs of the other person.

JESUS SHOWS US HOW FAITH WILL REACH BEYOND OUR BOUNDARIES

So what can we learn from this account of the Canaanite woman? Jesus points to the way in which his good news will reach those usually regarded as outsiders:

- The Canaanite woman becomes the voice from beyond the boundaries; it is a voice that cries in loving concern for her daughter.
- That voice precipitates the release of divine grace and dramatic healing. God not only hears our cries, but offers his healing presence to us, which brings courage, wholeness and love.
- She grasps what the Jewish leaders of the day could not perceive ... that good news belongs to the outsider. This aspect of the gospel changes the way we look at life and those around us.

The woman violates the boundaries set up with regard to ethnicity, heritage, religion and gender. She is willing to cross the boundaries, but so is Jesus. Human need is met by the long reach of God's gracious compassion.

This biblical narrative paints a picture of the first person outside Israel to whom Jesus ministered. This humble woman becomes significant because, from this small beginning, a world-wide mission is instituted. The Christian message has spread all over the world through stories that tell of his love—and, in one sense, we can all trace such a story to the willingness of Jesus to stop and listen to 'a cry from outside'.

There are times when we need to be reminded of the larger map—physically and spiritually—against which our mission must be understood.

Our mission is measured by our ability to give a significant place to the outsider. When we do that, we get close to the ministry of Jesus himself.

It is the cry of the outsider which reaches the ears of Jesus. Just as when children tried to come to Jesus, the disciples want to send the woman away. Jesus' response is: '*You have great faith! Your request is granted.*' And we are told, "... her daughter was healed from that very hour."