



The cry of the stranger

Matthew 15:21-28

As I continue to explore passages in Matthew's Gospel, I turn to what I believe to be one of the more difficult passages. Jesus leads his disciples to an entirely different region. He journeys to the area of Tyre and Sidon, away from Galilee and to the North-West by the Mediterranean coast.

I have become increasingly convinced of the importance of the Galilee in relation to Jesus' ministry. Therefore, it is interesting to note when he moves to a fresh location.

- Jesus is seeking some rest after a busy time
- He is certainly moving away from the religious leaders (15:1)
- Perhaps he is moving away from the crowds (15:10).

We remind ourselves of the wider context. From Matthew 14, a new phase of his work has begun—and this is following the death of John the Baptist. We recall that a great crowd had been fed, and Jesus came to the aid of the disciples and calmed the storm on the lake. You could reasonably consider Chapters 14-17 to be what one writer described as “a foreshadowing of the future”.

When Jesus Christ arrives at this new location, his fame has already gone ahead of him. If we assume he is seeking rest, he is certainly not going to achieve it here!

A woman from that vicinity—a Canaanite woman—comes and is crying out for help. This is ‘the cry of the stranger’.

- Most Jews would consider her to be ‘an outsider’
- Yet she addresses Jesus with his Messianic title
- But her plea for help was not on the basis of race or religion, but because of her need.

Matthew's account of the meeting between Jesus and the Canaanite woman follows the controversy with some Pharisees and teachers of the law (15:1-9). This invites comparison between the two incidents. Whenever we do this in relation to religious leaders, we should take care not to stereotype such people. Each should be treated as raising their own questions, rather than representing Judaism in total—or even all teachers of the law, scribes and Pharisees.

It takes a leap of imagination to understand and appreciate the impact of this encounter, if we ourselves are not first century Jews. The woman comes crying out for help for her daughter and the disciples are swift in trying to turn her away (v.23).

It is important that we consider the cultural presumptions the first readers of this gospel passage might hold – and particularly about the woman who comes to Jesus. The Canaanites were the inhabitants of a land that Israel entered at the time of Joshua. There are differences of ethnicity, heritage, religion and gender, which separate her from Judean social norms. You could add to that list the fact that demon possession further marginalises her daughter. In so many ways, she was “an outsider” or what I call ‘a stranger’.

I have no doubt that those who first heard the story would consider the woman's behaviour unacceptable. Her culture would demand that she is reserved in public. She not only takes the initiative, but also shouts her demand at Jesus. Perhaps this helps us to understand why, initially, Jesus appears not to respond to her (v.23).

We could look at the passage from numerous perspectives:



- Consider the powerful social impact of the encounter
- Reflect upon the impact upon Jesus' own ministry
- Importantly, we could ask how it impacts upon our mission and ministry.

Although Jesus is moving towards the cities of Tyre and Sidon, there could be some gentle questioning as to whether this is a deliberate move towards the Gentiles—because there were also Jewish towns in that area. I would rather see the account as not so much Jesus taking the initiative for a mission to the Gentiles, but rather a Gentile woman taking the initiative to encounter Jesus.

Let us look a little closer...

There are times of strategic withdrawal (v.21)

The words 'Jesus withdrew' are significant. I want to call this 'a strategic withdrawal'.

Jesus moved to the northern end of the Galilee region, and away from the lake, to seek peace, quiet and refreshment which was becoming increasingly hard to achieve at home.

- Crowds are always around him
- Religious leaders seem to trace his every step
- This new phase will actually culminate in the cross.

Finding times of strategic withdrawal can be difficult. There are occasions when each of us needs to do that. Strategic withdrawal can be a very positive experience.

- In spiritual terms, it can facilitate a 'check-up'
- In missiological terms, it helps us to refocus on our priorities
- In fellowship terms, it enables us to reconnect with each other.

This can be understood on these two different and yet equally important levels: one may be the personal and devotional aspects of our lives; and the other the focus of our mission as God's people in both Word and deed.

How many of us have come to really appreciate the purity of Judith Durham's voice, demonstrated for example as she sings the lyrics of 'A world of our own'? It was Tom Springfield's second mega hit for *The Seekers*, following 'I'll never find another you'. The bold use of the twelve string guitar builds the song to a great climax.

- It is more than a toe-tapping song
- It is calling the listener to imagine a world built just for you; good as that sounds, it is not our objective.

Jesus was not looking for individual space for any other reason than to enjoy God's presence and to be empowered for what lay before him. It would appear he would have the opportunity to heal, as we read of this encounter with a woman whose daughter was suffering terribly.

Interruptions of ten present moments of opportunity (v.22)

Throughout my ministry, I have shared with my people regarding the power of interruption throughout the ministry of Jesus in the gospels:

- On a journey, Jesus met the Samaritan woman



- He is frequently questioned – and responds in the form of parables
- He is awoken from sleep in the stern of the boat
- The woman with the issue of blood comes as he is on an urgent mission.

The acid test of all leadership is to remain focused and to handle interruptions—and be able to move on. We can be so convinced about our activities that we are incapable of responding to the unexpected.

Not very long ago, Carol and I were in the Strand in London, having a special lunch together. The restaurant had only just reopened after considerable refurbishment.

- After we had ordered, the manager came alongside us, knelt by our table and asked how we liked the refurbishment
- A considerable number of questions followed about why we had come, etc. It felt like an interview!
- The conversation drew to a close with him saying, “Lunch is on us today!” We certainly heard that comment.

Our meal was helpfully interrupted and a wonderful opportunity presented itself.

Jesus could have responded to the woman in need in various ways:

- Please, not now, I need to find rest
- I'd like to make an appointment at a more convenient time
- This is not my responsibility

This matter is important for all of us who engage with the stranger, wherever this might take place.

All of us are familiar with the hypocrisy that is so often associated with religious folk. It was Mark Twain who penetratingly observed, “Having spent considerable time with good people, I can understand why Jesus liked to be with tax collectors and sinners.”

Wilbur Reece challenged us all when he wrote his familiar piece about *Three Dollars' Worth of God*:-

“I would like to buy three dollars' worth of God, please. Not enough to explode my soul or disturb my sleep, but just enough to equal a cup of warm milk or a snooze in the sunshine.

“I don't want enough of him to make me love a black man or pick beetroot with a migrant. I want ecstasy, not transformation; I want the warmth of the womb not a new birth. I want a pound of the Eternal in a paper sack.

“I would like to buy three dollars' worth of God, please. No, no, not the flesh and blood one... he will keep me from my appointment with the hairdresser and make me late for the cocktail party. He will soil my linen and break my strand of matched pearls. I can't put up with pundits from Persia or sweaty shepherds trampling over my nylon carpet with their muddy feet. My name isn't Mary, you know.

“I want no living, breathing—but one I can keep in its crib with a rubber band. That plastic one will do just fine.”

As Jesus is interrupted, we find a wonderful example of how he returns to his primary mission of healing and caring for those outside the camp. This is one of the few occasions at this point in his ministry when Jesus moves away from Lake Galilee—and yet his mission is reinforced.



Our response to the stranger gives purpose to our mission (v.28)

There is a great deal to learn from this account, which causes us to re-examine our mission towards others. Her response is in stark contrast to:-

- The religious leaders—in the form of teachers of the law and Pharisees (v.v. 1-9)
- The disciples—in their lack of understanding (v.v.10-20).

For me, the most striking point about this woman is not only her persistence, though clearly that is present, but also her unpretentious approach to Jesus. The disciples' behaviour is understandable when viewed from their perspective—and even Jesus used some strong language. Some have felt that Jesus could have been considered offensive. Yet it did not damage the woman. She accepts his language regarding “dogs” and responds strongly: “Yes Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master’s table.” (v.27)

- Some have tried to take the sting out of the phrase by changing “dogs” to “little puppies”
- Others contend that he was testing either the woman’s or the disciples’ faith

Neither of these will satisfy, for we must see the wonderful way in which Jesus does bring healing in a complex situation:

- The Canaanite woman becomes the voice from beyond the boundary
- Her plea receives from Jesus a compassionate response of grace and healing
- She grasps what the disciples and others could not
- That is grace – and is good news for the stranger

The woman who approaches Jesus has many faces. She is of course a Gentile; she might well be a citizen of Tyre or Sidon and probably worships Herod. Yes, she’s a Canaanite. However, of all the roles that fill her life, the most significant at this moment in time is that she is the mother of a child.

Here is a mother who comes with the desperate cry of a concerned parent, and she petitions the One she has heard can bring healing in this troubled situation.

Her appeal is a compelling one. She calls him “Lord” and appeals respectfully, and one might even say cross-culturally, as she calls him “Son of David”.

Jesus initially seems undeterred and the mother continues her appeal on behalf of her tormented daughter: “Lord, help me!” (v.25).

Let me return to the language of Jesus, when he talks about her in terms of a “dog”. This is not what the more sensitive of us would expect. However, I am reminded that when Dorothy L Sayers presented a BBC radio play *The Man Born to be King*, first broadcast in 1941, some members of the public complained that it was too vulgar and irreverent. She later told how one correspondent laughably objected to Herod telling his court, “Keep your mouths shut,” on the grounds that such rough language was “jarring” on the lips of anyone “so closely connected with our Lord”. Such a sensitive soul clearly had not read his or her Bible!

What matters in this passage is that it is about mercy—and Jesus responds to that cry of mercy.

She craves mercy and, in Matthew’s Gospel, this is absolutely central to Jesus’ ministry. Twice, in recent clashes with the Pharisees over ritual purity and obedience to the Lord God, Jesus quoted



Hosea 6:6, "I desire mercy, not sacrifice," (Matthew 9:13 and 12:7). Mercy becomes the cornerstone of Jesus' critique of religion and lifestyle.

It is not surprising that Jesus says that her faith is great and what she is requesting is given to her. We are told that her daughter is healed instantly.

We could spend our time looking at this account and considering all the difficulties that we encounter. The passage has a demon; initially Jesus ignores the cries of a desperate mother; the disciples appear to be annoyed; and Jesus calls this woman a dog. There is enough for a series of sermons! What matters is that Jesus responds to this woman and brings healing on the basis of mercy. What does that have to say in relation to our own mission today?

We may ask, "Where is Jesus to be found?" As I study the New Testament, I ask that question with a special earnestness. In a day when brute force and success are worshipped, it is of more than passing interest to note that Jesus was often found with the unacceptable stranger!