



"Send her away, she's shouting at us" say the disciples to Jesus. Well, we can excuse them perhaps because you'll know if you saw the wonderful recent Netflix series '*Unorthodox*', you'll know that women had no place to approach a Rabbi or teacher, and as for someone non-Jewish and female being so bold, that would be the final straw - that was the context and culture which Jesus had grown up in.

But then we hear Jesus' stinging words to this woman in distress - practically calling her and her daughter 'dogs' (dogs thought of there at that time as unclean/verminous) and not even asking her name.

What do we think of that?

One of the best ways of finding out what God is like is simply to look at the person, life and death of Jesus, whose undying passion for mercy and justice, healing and forgiveness - in short, love for all - led him to his own passion, death and resurrection. Which is why this is one of the most extraordinary encounters in the gospels: there's something wrong here surely? Jesus' harsh treatment of an innocent woman - who'd heard of Jesus and had faith in his power to heal - and was simply asking for help.

It is tempting to make excuses or try to explain it away. Perhaps the Greek of Matthew's gospel might mean 'puppy' (not 'dog') so his words were more of a kindness. Perhaps Jesus knew from the start that he would help the woman, but wanted to test the disciples - or perhaps he was saying to the woman "my followers think you Canaanites are dogs, but what do you and I think about that"?

But that's not what the text says. In fact here is perhaps one of the most remarkable dialogues in all of Jesus' public ministry. St Matthew has, up to this point, devoted line after line to accounts of Jesus' message being totally *misunderstood*: the disciples don't always understand metaphors of the parables; the Pharisees are angered at Jesus for rattling their cage of rules and regulations. Then comes along a woman, a non-Jewish, Canaanite woman at that, who seems somehow to understand completely: in her pithy little statement about dogs and tables and crumbs, she makes her refreshing claim to grace and healing. She even embraces Jesus' metaphorical language: something the disciples don't always seem to manage. It's all so bold, so insightful, and, to Jesus' ears, so terribly beautiful. Not only does she see clearly who Jesus is, but also she understands how great is his power to heal. She sees that in Jesus God's mercy is abundant; God's healing and love overflows; there is enough for not only the 'Children of Israel', but also for the entire world and its peoples. So, Jesus was changed: he realised, "Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish." St Matthew wants us to see that Jesus was clearly surprised, challenged. And that he grew and changed as a result of his encounter with faith from the 'left field'.

That's precisely the point that St Matthew wants us modern-day apostles to really grasp. Faith, the movement of the Spirit, sometimes - often - comes from 'left-field', unexpected places. And if I'm open to that - if you are open to that - it might just change us, our thinking, our attitudes, our traditions - just as it changed Jesus.

Getting our head around that is going to be essential now for our spiritual, emotional and cultural well-being and health. Amidst a global pandemic, we Christians - and the cultures we are set in - we face a fundamental struggle about so many things: care for the planet so that we actually hand on something good our children; racial inequality; proper funding to make our health, education and justice systems work for everyone, not just the privileged or corrupt. For we know what others may not know – that no one is a “dog” and that everyone – but everyone – is a beloved child of God, deserving of God’s grace found in Jesus.

And for us who are 'the church': real questions coming out of the pandemic: how we can again truly be "a Christian presence in every community", lost in so many places; how will we use our sacred spaces, the buildings which have served and fed our forbears; how do we use worship to breathe life and light into our faith so that we are the light which shines light on the things which cause inequality.

That has to start with individuals - you and me.

Jesus listened and engaged with this stranger - someone so alien and different from the culture which had nurtured and surrounded him. Isn't this a model for listening to people who are not like us? How much do you really listen to people different from you, engage with them, learn new things from them. Different personalities. Different political views. Different ideas of how to be the church as we learn from the pandemic. How much do I really engage in courageous conversations, open-mindedness, practising acceptance, living in the mutual respect?

Will we be receptive to new ideas of how to be 'church' and live out our faith in a 'new normal'?

Will we model ourselves on Jesus who changed when he engaged with faith and understanding from a strange and unexpected quarter.

Or will we say, with the disciples "Send her away, she's shouting at us".

Matthew 15.21-28, NRSV

The Canaanite Woman's Faith

Jesus left that place and went away to the district of Tyre and Sidon. Just then a Canaanite woman from that region came out and started shouting, 'Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon.' But he did not answer her at all. And his disciples came and urged him, saying, 'Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us.' He answered, 'I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.' But she came and knelt before him, saying, 'Lord, help me.' He answered, 'It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs.' She said, 'Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table.' Then Jesus answered her, 'Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.' And her daughter was healed instantly.

Canon Philip Banks, St Edmundsbury Cathedral Residentiary Canon responsible for worship, music and fabric.

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