

LOOKING AT LIFE THROUGH THE LENS OF THE GOSPEL

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TWENTIETH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

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Matt. 15:21 Jesus left that place and went away to the district of Tyre and Sidon. ²² 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." ²³ 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." ²⁴ He answered, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." ²⁵ But she came and knelt before him, saying, "Lord, help me." ²⁶ He answered, "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." ²⁷ She said, "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table." ²⁸ Then Jesus answered her, "Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish." And her daughter was healed instantly.

Jesus is always attentive to life. That is where he discerns God's will. He looks deeply into creation and grasps the mystery of the Father, who invites him to care tenderly for the smallest of his creatures. He opens his heart to people's suffering, and hears in it the voice of God calling him to alleviate their pain.

The gospels have preserved the memory of Jesus' encounter with a pagan woman in the region of Tyre and Sidon. It is a surprising story, showing us how Jesus learned to be faithful to God.

A woman, alone and in despair, comes out to meet him. She can only do one thing: shout and beg for mercy. Her daughter is not only sick and out of her mind, but 'tormented by a demon'. Her home has become a hell. The cry rises up from her broken heart "Lord, help me!"

Jesus answers with surprising coolness. He has a very specific, well-defined mission: he was "sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel". The pagan world is not part of his mission: "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs".

It is a harsh thing to say, but the woman does not take offence. She knows her request is right, and she throws Jesus' image back to him with these admirable words: "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table".

Suddenly Jesus sees everything in a new light. The woman is right: what she wants is in line with the will of God, who wants no one to suffer. With compassion and admiration he replies: "Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish".

Jesus, who always seemed so sure of his own mission, is letting this pagan woman teach him and correct him. Suffering knows nothing of boundaries. It is true that his mission is to Israel, but God's compassion extends to anyone who suffers.

When we meet someone who suffers, there God's will shines in all its brilliance. God wants us to alleviate their suffering. That comes first. Everything else is secondary. This is the path Jesus followed out of faithfulness to the Father.

JOSÉ A PAGOLA - The Way Opened up by Jesus

REFLECTION

The readings today have some surprises that may be lost on modern readers because we are not sufficiently aware of the religious and ethnic tensions that lie behind them. However, many would be surprised at the response of Jesus and it is important to take time to deal with that. We are presented here with a Jesus who at first sight appears to be unwilling to help, but we are also presented with a Jesus who can be reached and indeed forced into a change of heart. This is Jesus the man who also had to learn about the universal will of his Father to see all people. He was taught this lesson not in a theology class but through an encounter with a human being in need, and Matthew's Jewish Christian community held on to this memory because they too had to come to terms with welcoming outsiders into their midst. There are many lessons for today's world, plagued as it is by all kinds of fundamentalisms, in this encounter between Jesus and the unnamed foreign woman.

SEAN GOAN - Let the Reader Understand

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

This extremely interesting story is found also in Mark 7:24-30, but not in Luke. (Luke may omit it because he writes for a Gentile community and for him openness to the Gentiles is no longer an issue.) Both versions are striking and the differences between them shed a great deal of light on the "project" of each gospel writer.

In Mark, Jesus seems to go alone and for no purpose. He enters a house, apparently because he did not want to be recognised in an area where he has never been. The child is a little daughter. The woman is extremely respectful. Only then are we told she was a Gentile (lit. a Greek), a Syrophenician. Using a parabolic saying, Jesus implies that his message is for the children and not the outsiders ("dogs"). Her witty response gains her her request—i.e. her faith is implicitly recognised. Jesus exorcises the child and the cure is fully reported in v.30. adjustments

Matthew has fundamentally the same story, but with significant. Jesus goes to Tyre and Sidon, this time with his disciples. He does not go indoors and is not afraid to be recognised. We are told immediately that the woman is a Canaanite. Matthew supplies the woman's words, which are rich in meaning ("Lord", "son of David"). Jesus ignores her. The disciples intervene, but only to confirm Jesus' apparent rebuff. V.24 is special to Matthew. Eventually, the woman changes her tone and posture, begging for help ("Lord"). Jesus' reply is shorter, perhaps in the light of v. 24. The woman agrees with what Jesus has said and only then goes on, in the same parabolic vein, to make her request. Her faith is explicitly acknowledged and the cure is proclaimed. The confirmation is reported in as few words as possible.

Both accounts are strange. Jesus seems to make this journey for no purpose, has a chance encounter and returns. In Mark, there is indoor / outdoor symbolism, suggesting insiders / outsiders. Matthew makes the purpose and problem very clear in v. 24. In both accounts, a foreign woman causes Jesus to open his preaching to non-Israelites. The story is never resumed again. The comments below will bring out further details.

KIND OF WRITING

There are two stories here and two levels. The motivating story concerns a sick child and mother's plea. Without this the second story—a theological argument using the significant image of bread, children and dogs—would not exist. The discussion is the point of the story in both versions, perhaps more strongly in Matthew who underplays the cure aspect. As regards the layers, it looks as if historically Jesus had very little contact with Gentiles. The opening of the mission to include the Gentiles—permitted by this story—is to be read at the level of the community at the time of writing.

Verse 24 Possibly we are overhearing the tendency of some in the Matthean community to exclude those of Gentile origin.

KIERAN O'MAHONY OSA - www.tarsus.ie

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. Having met with rejection from the Pharisees Jesus goes to Gentile territory and encounters unexpected faith in the Canaanite woman. His mission had previously been to his own people. This adds a new dimension to his mission. Have you had occasions when a chance encounter set your life off in a new direction?
2. The initial reaction of Jesus to the woman was one of rejection but her persistence won a response from him. When have you found that persistence was needed to gain what you sought? What did that experience teach you?
3. In our days welcoming the stranger is a challenge. We are more comfortable with our own. What difference has it made when you were able to offer a friendly welcoming face to a stranger?
4. Who are the 'Canaanite women' who call out for attention today – people in Church or State whose needs are not being attended to?

JOHN BYRNE OSA - Intercom

To get the significance of verse 21 we must look at the preceding passage which tells of the Pharisees' continued hostility to Jesus. It was because he was rejected by the religious leaders then that Jesus decided to 'leave that place' and withdraw to a foreign environment, and as a result experienced a radically new dimension to his mission. So often an experience of rejection leads to new possibilities being opened up. Our 'region of Tyre and Sidon' turns out to be a place of new beginnings.

This is another of the many stories of Jesus healing someone 'tormented by a devil'. We can be creative in interpreting what this means. We think of the demonic forces which 'torment' people and societies today - elitism in its many forms, the desire to avenge old injustices, ruthless ambition.

MICHEL DE VERTEUIL - *Lectio Divina* on the Sunday Gospels

Following an altercation with the religious leaders Jesus 'left that place and went to the area of Tyre and Sidon'. The geography in today's text is important because these areas were no-go for a respectable Jew. Canaanites were despised by the people of Israel. They were exiled so the Israelites could take control of their land. Relations between the two groups were extremely hostile. By approaching Jesus, the Canaanite woman crosses the boundaries of ethnicity as well as gender. The Canaanite woman is the first woman to speak in Matthew's Gospel. She not only speaks, she shouts at Jesus: 'Lord, help me!'

The response of Jesus that follows has disturbed biblical scholars for ever. Was he joking? We just don't know. What we do know is that this incident is of huge importance for the community Matthew writes for as it concerns the expansion of Jesus' mission to the Gentiles. The dialogue between Jesus and the woman is one that can only happen in a space of honesty and acceptance. Though her resistance she stands up for all those who are dismissed, and in doing so she is praised for her 'great faith' and her daughter is healed.

*The Canaanite woman stands to take her rightful place. What is your experience of hearing the voices of women in church? This week, check out **Catholic Women Preach** www.catholicwomenpreach.org*

TRÍONA DOHERTY & JANE MELLETT - Go. Deeper