

Feisty faith, feasting! (Matthew 15.21-28)

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If you're like me, you're both delighted and perplexed by this story. Delighted by this Canaanite woman's faithful insistence and what it achieves for her daughter. And perplexed by the way Jesus speaks to her, at least initially; by his apparent disrespect and rudeness, which seems so out of character. A few verses earlier he'd cautioned: 'It's what comes out of the mouth that defiles the person' (11), and then *he* says this! Was it a slip-up, a momentary loss of composure? Was he just having a bad day, or is there more going on here?

The passage starts with a note about Jesus travelling '*away to the district of Tyre and Sidon*', north of Galilee. In terms of locating this incident, I suspect this is more than a geographical reference. In the gospels, Tyre and Sidon were code names for 'paganville' (Bruner 2004.96), Jesus has left Israel to visit Gentile lands. Interestingly, when Jesus sent his disciples out on mission, he'd specifically told them 'not to go into any Gentile territory' (10.5). So, why are they going now?

In Mark's version of this story, Matthew's source, we're told that Jesus was seeking space; the crowds have been pressing and Pharisees increasingly questioning his legitimacy; it's been full-on and he was looking to retreat (perhaps to somewhere he was less well-known). There's a logic here, but even so it's interesting that he chose Gentile towns.

Well, if it is peace he's looking for, he doesn't get it, which may explain his frustration when, 'just then', a local Canaanite woman comes up calling loudly. The issue here is that not only is she

compromising his 'day off' – but he's now thrust onto the horns of a dilemma. For Jews of Jesus' day, it's hard to imagine a bigger threat to purity and religious integrity than a Canaanite woman. Israel's faith, her sense of the one true God has been hard won in opposition to Canaanite fertility gods and practices such as child sacrifice and temple prostitution. This isn't just a different tradition – it's one the prophets had condemned as undermining of true worship and faithfulness. And yet, this woman, a Canaanite, is incredibly respectful of Jesus and his religion; she calls him Lord, Son of David – a *messianic* title. The Pharisees constantly question his identity, but this outsider *sees and seeks* him. *'Lord, Son of David, have mercy on me, for my daughter is horribly oppressed by a demon'*.

And with these words, suddenly she doesn't seem so 'other'. She may be foreign – to Jesus and to us, but this woman is also a mother, a parent with a heart breaking for her child. We parents and grandparents, we get that, don't we; our child's struggles, their torment and misery ... we feel it ... *Jesus have mercy on me, for my daughter (...my son) is tormented by a demon??* It's a poignant moment, *'but he did not respond to her with a single word'*, it says. Silence... And maybe that's how it is when we pray too... The heavens, like brass... nothing, just silence, and we wonder what it means. Is he ignoring us? Is it a sign that he doesn't care? What does this silence mean?

Some suggest that Jesus' silence is testing, to see how committed this woman really is. Michael Green thinks he's wrestling with what to do (given that she's a Gentile) and, in view of what

unfolds, this makes sense – Jesus discerning his way; working through what it means to be faithful.

The woman herself is undaunted. She keeps on calling, and this really gets to the disciples. It's easy to miss their role in this story, but they don't exactly cover themselves with glory. Clearly, they're *not* wrestling with what to do. Get rid of her! That's their solution, and no doubt they had a bible verse or two to justify their stance, some text about avoiding defilement and the like...

At this point, Jesus breaks his silence with words that appear to support exactly what the disciples want. *'I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel'*, he says. Or at least, that's how our version reads. But who was he talking to (it doesn't say)? And was it as definitive as it sounds? In the Greek text there's no punctuation – no commas, full stops or question marks. Translators have to assume the inflection from context. Which means he could've been questioning, musing out loud: *'I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel!'* *What about this lost sheep? She's struggling and she's come to me; is it right to refuse her because she's not an Israelite?* Jesus knew his scripture, he'd have known all those stories where Gentiles received grace from God - Naaman the leper, for one. Indeed, he himself healed a Roman (Gentile) centurion's servant back in chapter eight. Yes, his calling is to Israel; *but* *'... only ... Israel?'* 'It is one of the marks of greatness to allow compassion for people to overrule premeditated programmes', Greene writes, and maybe that's what's happening here. Rather than being legalistic and offensive (which seems so out of character), could it be that Jesus is wrestling with what it means to be faithful?

Whatever it is, one thing is clear, and that's that this woman was neither offended nor discouraged by what Jesus said. In fact, at this point she came and knelt worshipfully before him, saying: *'Lord, help me.'* Once again, Jesus seems to fob her off with something that sounds offensive: *'It's not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs'*. 'Dogs' being a derogatory term for Gentiles. Again, this doesn't sound great – but, a couple of details to note in the text. The Greek word for 'dogs' here means 'house dogs', domestic dogs, not those mangy things that run wild in a lot of these places. Greene translates it 'pups', which sounds quite affectionate. That may be stretching it, but the point is, it's not the really offensive word for dog. Domestic dogs were allowed in the house, and as this woman points out, got to eat scraps that fell from the table. When my kids were young that was the first stage of the dinner clean-up – bring in the dog!!

Once again, the woman, (who could've been offended) is not in the slightest put-off. She refuses to take offense at the shadow side of his remark. On the contrary, she responds playfully and turns it to her advantage: *'Yes, Lord, (true) yet even dogs get to eat the crumbs that fall under their master's table'*. It's brilliant; humorous and inoffensive! And it shows real insight. She knows he (the 'Master') won't be here for long, in her neck of the woods. This is a 'crumb' opportunity, a morsel of possibility has unexpectedly dropped her way – and she's not going to miss it. You can't help but be impressed with this woman, she's got real pluck. And Jesus relishes it: *'O woman, your faith is terrific; let it be done as you wish.'* And, *'her daughter was healed that very moment.'*

The story ends with delight and liberation – the daughter is freed from her oppression, the woman from her agony. And Jesus too, seems freer – as if he’s resolved something that’s been weighing on him. Bruner writes of it as a kind of ‘Gentile Gethsemane’ – where he wrestles to discern the scope of his mission. And this does seem to fit with how the story unfolds. In the first two of Jesus’ responses, those bits that perplex us, the text says simply, ‘he answered’. There’s no designation of who he’s speaking to (hence the suggestion that he could be musing to himself – working something through). But on the third and final occasion (remembering the significance of the ‘third’ in so many stories), his response is emphatic: ‘Then Jesus answered her, ‘Woman...’ And note there’s no hesitancy, he’s totally resolved about what to do and affirming of her: Your faith is terrific!! Let it be done for you as you wish.’ He honours her; her ‘doggedness’ (!!); her request. Something has shifted.

So, this story reveals something about Jesus and his growing appreciation of his mission to the whole world – Gentiles included (remember his words to his disciples at the end of this gospel: ‘go into all the world’).

It also says something about this woman and what it means to ‘live by faith’. She really is an impressive person. If we want to know what it means to hang in during hard times, to persevere in the face of silence, delay and discouragement, she’s our girl. And, surely that’s part of what this story is inviting – perseverance and pluck when it comes to faith, being alert to the presence of the Master and the possibilities of the moment. This woman is humble and respectful, but she’s no

shrinking violet, she takes a stand for her life, for mercy, *and Jesus affirms it!*

A few weeks ago, we heard Jacob insist to his night time assailant: *'I will not let you go until you bless me.'* In her own way, this woman is doing the same thing with Jesus. She sticks with him, will not let go, and in the end, this too brings blessing – for herself and her daughter, and, in a way, for the whole Gentile world (including you and me!!). If that's not encouragement to persevere faith-fully, I don't know what is.