

## **Dreghorn and Springside Parish Church: Sunday 16<sup>th</sup> August 2020**

### **Bible Reading Matthew 15:21-28**

#### **A Woman's Faith**

<sup>21</sup> Jesus left that place and went off to the territory near the cities of Tyre and Sidon. <sup>22</sup> A Canaanite woman who lived in that region came to him. "Son of David!" she cried out. "Have mercy on me, sir! My daughter has a demon and is in a terrible condition."

<sup>23</sup> But Jesus did not say a word to her. His disciples came to him and begged him, "Send her away! She is following us and making all this noise!"

<sup>24</sup> Then Jesus replied, "I have been sent only to the lost sheep of the people of Israel."

<sup>25</sup> At this the woman came and fell at his feet. "Help me, sir!" she said.

<sup>26</sup> Jesus answered, "It isn't right to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs."

<sup>27</sup> "That's true, sir," she answered, "but even the dogs eat the leftovers that fall from their masters' table."

<sup>28</sup> So Jesus answered her, "You are a woman of great faith! What you want will be done for you." And at that very moment her daughter was healed.

#### **Sermon "Custard with your Yorkshires!"**

Like many others, this year's plans just have not worked out and we're in the process of cancelling our Israel trip. Our first stay in the country was to be in Tiberias, on the Sea of Galilee, some forty miles south of the region of Tyre and Sidon, the setting of today's Bible reading.

I was very much looking forward to our trip to the Holy Land. To see the sites of the Old and New Testament and also to get a flavour of the land today, including experiencing something of the contrasts between Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories. A country and peoples separated today, as they were in the time of Jesus.

In our Bible story we find that things have been hotting up for Jesus around Galilee. Earlier in this chapter we read that a deputation of Scribes and Pharisees have been sent to him from Jerusalem. Sent to test him - is Jesus sticking to the law or is he a heretic?

Things have been coming to the boil. But it is way too early, Jesus does not want to be forced to Jerusalem to face the cross just yet, he has a plan, an order to follow.

So, he leaves Galilee and the Jewish people behind, and takes some time in the land of the Canaanites in the region of Tyre and Sidon, which is modern day Lebanon. Tyre and Sidon are just an hour drive south of Beirut, a city and a people we are keeping very much in our prayers just now.

The Canaanites are not Jews, they are Gentiles. And there, in that other land he meets a Canaanite woman with a sick child ... and she speaks to him. It's just so wrong that she speaks with him. She was the wrong faith. She was a Canaanite Gentile he was a Jew. She was of the wrong race. She was of the wrong gender; he was male, she was female. She had demons in her family, he was the holy one of Israel.

Jesus ignores her, and when he is badgered by the disciples to do something he says, 'I have been sent only to the lost sheep of the people of Israel.' But still she persists. When Jesus does eventually engage with her, he says something really quite offensive, he says, 'It isn't right to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs.'

That hurts. These are hard words, shocking in the mouth of Jesus - words that are very difficult for us to read, especially today when our ears are acutely sensitive to language that puts down another due to their ethnicity. It looks like Jesus is refusing to help somebody just because they are of the wrong race. We would be up in arms over a doctor or nurse who refused to treat a patient just because they were not from the right family background or were not of the right colour.

Should we then be iconoclasts and set about tearing down Christian imagery with the same sentiment that have seen many statues toppled recently? If we did, that would be a shallow reading of this story and a misunderstanding of context and the much greater story that surrounds this encounter.

For a start when we look at the family tree of Jesus, we find that he himself shares Canaanite lineage. Look up your Bible at Matthew Chapter 1: 3-5; three women named in Jesus' genealogy are Canaanite women: they are Rahab, Tamar, and Ruth. This Canaanite woman and Jesus are of the same blood. There's something subversive going on here.

And second, Jesus is not a travelling doctor whose task is to heal all-comers. He has a very specific mission; he has come to for 'the lost sheep of the people of Israel'. The Kingdom that Israel was longing for was coming and was coming, in order - to them first. And if God's new life was to come into the whole world then it would come first through Israel, just as the Scriptures had said.

A while ago Joanne and I were invited over to another couples for tea. It was a meal with a twist; every item on the menu from starter to sweet had a number allocated to it and every eating implement and dish, spoon, knife, fork, pudding bowl etc also had a number. You randomly chose numbers and your selection was put together. Starters were mixed with main course and sweet on the same plate, you got custard in your Yorkshire puddings, that kind of thing. I smiled, but was not that impressed. We like to have order; it so often has good purpose.

But this woman was persistent, she's not one for order! She loves her daughter. She does not go away; she will not be dismissed. We find here that Jesus is not yet ready for the cross, but this woman is already insisting on Easter.

In her canny banter with Jesus she shows deep understanding of how the mission to Israel was going to work out in practice. Yes, she agrees the dogs can't simply share the children's food. Her argument is that if God really is going to work first through Israel and then outwards to the whole world, then gentiles will indeed share the scraps that fall from the Israel's table. And this incredible woman, fighting with all her wit and her might does something amazing; she brings the future into the present, her daughter is healed.

At the cross Jesus will stretch out his arms wide and call all people to him. He dies there for the Jews and the Canaanites, folks from Jerusalem and folks from Dreghorn and Springside, for you, whoever you are, wherever you've been and whatever you have done, and also for me. At the cross he dies for all of us, regardless of our ethnicity, sexuality, gender, religion or however else we might be labelled. And at Easter he is resurrected in love for all of us, and then he initiates a worldwide mission for all, sending his disciples to and share his good news with 'all peoples everywhere'.

This Canaanite woman has brought the future into present; she called the Kingdom into the here and the now and she claimed it for her daughter. This is powerful, heaven moving stuff.

In the early nineteenth century many Christians agreed that slavery was immoral and wrong, and many wanted it stopped, but not many wanted to do it just yet. William Wilberforce and his friends worked and prayed, devoting their lives to the belief that what was to happen in the future had to happen, by God's power in the present as well. That faith of Wilberforce is same the 'great faith' that Jesus congratulated the Canaanite women on.

So, what then are the issues that we face today? What are the promises of God that we have imagined might be fulfilled in some distant future, but we really should claim for today and then commit to working towards them through prayer, in faith and with perseverance? Think of these things... Amen.

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16<sup>th</sup> August 2020