

Reflection for Trinity 10 from the Revd Liz Jones

The Canaanite woman's faith

In our gospel reading today, we hear about Jesus' encounter with the Canaanite woman which we may find unsettling.

Jesus is less than eager to help this woman, explaining that his mission is first to the house of Israel. However, Jesus is the one who has left Jewish territory and invaded this woman's world. Furthermore, this Canaanite woman -- an unclean, outsider -- demonstrates that she has a better grasp of Jesus' identity than the hand-selected disciples do at this point in the narrative. Jesus' encounter with the Canaanite woman unsettles boundaries and calls into question definitions of clean and unclean.

In our current situation in the pandemic, cleanliness is high priority wherever you go. Shops that we go into all have hand sanitising gel at the entrance, tills have Perspex screens up to help protect staff and customers. We are constantly washing our hands and cleaning things that we have touched. Everywhere around us there is a real practical process of being clean.

In the hospital all staff have to have regular hand hygiene testing to demonstrate that we all keep our hands clean enough and there are now green or 'clean areas' where there are no patients who have the covid virus.

The story starts with the woman greeting Jesus as the "Son of David." Her recognition is all the more remarkable because the disciples have been a bit slow in recognizing Jesus. In Matthew 14, after the walking on the sea, they do recognize Jesus as the Son of God, but it is not until 16:16 that Peter declares Jesus as Messiah. Yet, this woman hails Jesus as the Son of David, begs his mercy, and entreats his power over a demon that has "severely" possessed her daughter (v. 22). How is it possible that this woman has more insight into Jesus' identity than his disciples? She is, after all, an unclean outsider, part of a people who are remembered as an old enemy of Israel.

Jesus' response is, perhaps, the most perplexing piece of this narrative. At first, he does not say a word to her, but he refuses to send her away. Only after her persistence does he converse with her. Twice, he explains to her that his mission is first to the "lost sheep of the house of Israel."

The disciples, too, seem to think that Jesus should stay focused on the needs of Israel. They kept telling him to send her away because they are tired of hearing her cries for help (15:23).

Perhaps, Jesus' refusal to listen to the disciples gave the woman hope that her request would be heard. She does something that is significant in this Gospel: she kneels before him. For the woman to treat Jesus in this manner is in keeping with her earlier declaration of Jesus as the Son of David.

Kneeling is not only a sign of kingship, but also recognition of power. There is a connection between those who kneel before Jesus and the healings that Jesus performs. A leper kneels before Jesus and asks to be made clean (Matt 8:2). A ruler kneels and asks for his daughter's healing (9:18). At the end of this Gospel, when the resurrected Lord appears, the disciples bow before him, and Jesus says that all authority in heaven and earth is his (28:17-18). Bowing in worship also recalls Jesus' command to worship only the Lord God (4:9). This woman kneels before one whom she recognizes as having authority not only to sit on the throne of David, but to wield power over evil.

Jesus' response to her second cry for help includes a reiteration of his mission to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. He even likens her status as a Gentile to the status of the small, pet dogs who long to be fed from the table (15:26).

The woman, however, is not deterred. She claims a place in the household, but it is not a position of privilege or even the position of an insider. She accepts the status of a family's dog by claiming that even the dog enjoys crumbs from the table.

Her statement is striking. She places hope in what others have discarded. This Son of David has so much power that there is enough power for the house of Israel and more than enough left over for her. She is not trying to thwart his mission. She just wants a crumb, recognizing that even a crumb is powerful enough to defeat the demon that has possessed her daughter.

Jesus praises her faith. This woman seems to understand what the members of the household of Israel have yet to grasp. Jesus is not just hope for Israel, but hope for the world.

So what does this all mean to us? Was Jesus just tired and having a bad day. Or he was teaching his disciples something? Was Jesus testing the woman's faith; as if her life was not enough of a test? Regardless of why Jesus did what he did we still may feel uncomfortable in the way that he did eventually help the Canaanite woman? That's not the Jesus that we may want but that's the Jesus we get in today's gospel. And sometimes that's the Jesus we get in life.

There are days that we pray and get no answer. We come before God and offer all that we are and all that we have. We speak our words, express our feelings, make known our needs and nothing happens. We wait. We listen. God is silent. It's like talking to a brick wall. If you've ever felt that way then you know this Canaanite woman. "Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon." But he did not answer her at all, there are no words, no gestures, no acknowledgment, no explanation. Nothing at all.

What do we do when that happens? Where do we go? Do give up? Get mad? Leave the church?

I don't know why Jesus acted the way he did. Maybe we don't need to know. Maybe this story is not even about Jesus. It's about us, our faith, and our world. Life is difficult. Deep abiding faith is a real struggle. The world is broken and at times we may feel God has abandoned us all. However, there is a message of encouragement in this story. An example of persisting in prayer and to keep seeking Jesus in the journeys through life that we are all on, and to rejoice in the promise that is declared at the end of Matthew's gospel:

'And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age'. Amen