

Sermon for 16th August 2026 – Year A – Pentecost 12 – Proper 15

Preached at St John's Baillieston

Matthew 15:10-28

Sermon

Today's gospel reading comes in two parts, that at first glance may seem very disconnected from each other. In the first incident, we see Jesus dealing with religious leaders, socially accepted members of the establishment, who want to emphasise rules about external purity to marginalise those they see as unclean and unworthy of God's attention and love. In the second incident, however, it is Jesus who is the socially accepted establishment figure and the marginalised Canaanite woman is the one begging to be accepted as worthy of having her daughter healed by God. In the first case it is Jesus who offers the insightful punchline about defilement coming from the heart, not external appearances, whereas in the second it is the woman who outflanks Jesus's apparent prejudice – based on her outward appearance it must be said – and forces him to re-evaluate who God is calling into his kingdom.

Let's deal with the first part quickly, because there's so much more to say about the second. Jesus is responding to some scribes and Pharisees, who have arrived from Jerusalem to complain that he and his disciples are not following proper religious laws about hand-washing. Just to be clear, they weren't coming at this from a health perspective – they didn't understand germ theory. They just had a religious rule that you are ceremonially defiled if you don't ritually wash your hands before eating. A good rule, as it happens, but they had turned it into another way of socially excluding people. A few verses before our passage starts, Jesus pours scorn on their hypocrisy by pointing out how they only follow the religious laws when it suits them, and then he explains to the disciples that true

holiness has nothing to do with what you eat, or how you wash, but everything to do with your moral character and virtue – the actions that flow naturally out of your own heart.

This may all seem fairly obvious to us today, but actually, I have been in churches where having a visible tattoo was enough to mark a person as morally dubious, not to mention being openly gay, so it's still good to hear Jesus disapproving of religious rules that are only enforced on marginalised people while the wealthy and powerful either put on a fine show of public purity or find loopholes to excuse their own selfishness while keeping others in their place.

Except that in the very next section of the Gospel, *Jesus* is the powerful establishment figure travelling in a foreign land and putting a woman in her place.

Let's be honest, this passage makes Jesus look like a terrible human being, at least from our modern perspective. But that hasn't stopped Christian apologists and commentators trying to justify – or at least explain – Jesus's behaviour.

It's probably worth noting first that Matthew's Gospel was primarily written to Jewish Christians, as opposed to Luke's Gospel which focuses more on the inclusion and worldview of non-Jews. So, the starting point for Matthew's Gospel is to show that Jesus is the Jewish Messiah. This is why, I think, we have Jesus apparently saying, "I have been sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel," and why foreigners such as this Canaanite woman are depicted as showing such enormous deference and honour to Jesus and to his culture, despite his offensive language towards her. He was just saying what everyone was thinking.

For the original readers or hearers of Matthew's Gospel, this Canaanite woman was separated from their culture by vast differences of ethnicity, religion, and the fact that she is a woman with a demon-possessed daughter – another woman. The Canaanites were, after all, the peoples that had been displaced and subject to genocide during Israel's conquest of the Promised Land hundreds of

years earlier. In addition, the woman herself is behaving in an unseemly manner. In her own culture, women were expected to be reserved in public, not shouting her demands at a Jewish rabbi. Jesus responds according to social norms – he ignores her completely, and when his disciples ask him to send her away because of her uncouth shouting, he delivers his line about only being sent to the lost sheep of Israel. This is certainly not the Jesus who is so generous and inclusive with other foreigners such as the Samaritan woman at the well in John's gospel.

The interaction then takes a turn for the worse as the woman falls at Jesus's feet and pleads for mercy. "Lord, help me!" she cries, in a surely intentional echo of Peter's use of the same words – "Help me!" in last week's Gospel, when he starts to sink through lack of faith after walking on water towards Jesus. While Jesus immediately reached out and saved Peter, here Jesus insults the kneeling woman by calling her a dog in contrast to the children of Israel.

Unsurprisingly, apologists have felt the need to explain or mitigate this cruel insult in various ways. Firstly, the Greek word used for 'dog' is not '*kuon*' which means a dirty scavenging street dog, but '*kynarion*' which means 'little puppy' or 'household pet.' This reflects the Jewish sense of being God's chosen people – his children – called to graciously bless the surrounding admittedly lesser cultures. It is still grossly patronising – a puppy is still a dog – but maybe not quite as harsh as first appears, and certainly in keeping with what the original readers of Matthew's gospel might have expected from their religious leaders.

A second idea is that Jesus might be saying these things purely as a test of the woman's faith. Will she get angry and insult him back, revealing her initial reverence and respect as fake? By persisting with grace and humility in the face of refusal and dismissal, she demonstrates the truth of Jesus's parables about persistence in prayer, such as his story in Luke's gospel about the widow who pesters the unjust judge until he finally gives her justice. Since the Canaanite

woman passes this test, Jesus declares to her, “Great is your faith!” and her daughter is immediately healed.

A third idea is that rather than Jesus himself holding such xenophobic views of this group of foreigners, this was an act of so-called ‘prophetic theatre,’ intentionally mimicking the ugly ethnocentric prejudices of his disciples and his culture, to ridicule them. By immediately praising the Canaanite woman’s faith in the face of insult, and healing her daughter, Jesus dismantled his disciples’ bigotry and showed that even the most socially inferior and excluded non-Jews were worth of God’s mercy.

Personally, I think that both these latter two interpretations still show Jesus using a desperate woman’s traumatic circumstances as a convenient ‘teaching moment’ for his disciples, and I’m not convinced this in any way mitigates the awfulness of Jesus’s initial gut response.

So, the final idea I want to discuss, offered by more progressive theologians, is to start by accepting that in his harsh, insulting words, Jesus is demonstrating genuine human limitation and racial and nationalist prejudice, and is forced to re-evaluate his perspective by the generosity, wit, and wisdom of one of the most marginalised members of a denigrated foreign culture.

From this perspective, we are invited to recognise that Jesus was fully human, initially limited by first century Jewish biases and ethnocentric perspectives. He therefore responds honestly and brutally out of an exclusive nationalism, but the woman’s brilliant retort that ‘even the puppies eat the crumbs from under their master’s table’ forces him to reassess and expand his own understanding of his mission. Indeed, by the end of Matthew’s gospel, Jesus commands his disciples to “Go and make disciples of all nations,” and the restriction on only reaching out to the lost sheep of Israel has been long forgotten. So, thank God for this woman, even though, as usual, we do not even know her name.