

**Text of a Sermon preached at St David's, Anglican, Applecross 20 August 2023.
Pentecost 12, Year A. Matthew 15. 21-28.**

Our Gospel passage today is both shocking and a perfect experience of how we enter scripture and are formed and changed in our moral and ethical decisions.

It is shocking because it presents a very different Jesus than the compassionate saviour we are used to. Here, Jesus refuses to help a mother in distress, not once, not twice, but three times. And why does he refuse? Because of her race, her ethnicity; because she is not a Jew, one of the lost sheep of Israel.

To rescue this text some preachers tell us Jesus is 'testing the faith' of the Canaanite woman.

The woman's faith, however, that Jesus is the Jewish messiah, is evident in her first *unprompted* words, "Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David". It is further evidenced by the repeated use of 'Lord' and kneeling before Jesus, an act of worship. It is only at verse 26 that Jesus finally addresses the woman and so could even begin to 'test' her faith.

There is no test of the woman's faith, and the passage remains shocking.

As confronting as it is today, however, it was even more outrageous to the original hearers of Matthew's Gospel. Matthew's audience were mostly Jewish Christians living in urban Antioch, part of a culture which traditionally kept itself apart from non-Jews, the Gentiles, whom they considered unclean and referred to derogatively as "dogs" - which puts a new slant on the Jesus's words, "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs."

To get a sense of the full 'shock-factor' of this passage and to bring this inspired and holy text alive, we could render it like this:

Jesus left that place and withdrew to the district of York and Beverley, the place of frontier wars, the place where wheat is grown.

Just then, at that exact time, a Noongar woman from that region came out and started shouting, 'Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is possessed, taken by the white man's grog.'

But he did not answer her at all.

And his disciples came and urged him, saying, 'Get rid of her, break up with her, for she keeps shouting after us.'

He answered, 'I was sent only to the white colonialists of Australia.'

But she came and knelt before him in worship, saying, 'Lord, help me.'

He answered, 'It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs.'

She said, 'Yes, Lord, yet even the puppies eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table.'

Then Jesus answered her, 'Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.' And her daughter was free and sober instantly.

Our changes highlight part of what Matthew is communicating in this extraordinary passage, a key to which is the concept of possession.

The Canaanite woman has a daughter who is tormented, that is possessed, by a demon. God, in the Jewish Scriptures, our Old Testament, gives the land of Canaan to the Jews for an everlasting *possession*. The Greek translation of the Jewish scriptures used by Matthew's community, the Septuagint, uses the same root word for possession of Land and possession of people.

So, the Jews possessed the Land of Canaan, just as the original English settlers possessed this Land we call Western Australia.

Now, the plea of the Canaanite woman appears to be for Jesus to de-possess her daughter alone. But something far more is going on here.

At the time of Jesus, there *were* no Canaanites. They had all been wiped out. This is why in Mark's Gospel, written before Matthew, the woman is referred to accurately as Syrophenician. Matthew in his writing changes her to be a Canaanite.

Why? By making the woman Canaanite, Matthew is able to symbolize the both the ancient enemies of the Jews and the concept of **all** Gentiles, that is all non-Jews, just as our Noongar mother can represent all First Nations peoples, Yamatji, Wiradjuri and others.

For us today, the daughter is all the daughters, all the progeny, all of the future of our First Nations peoples, the people excluded in their own possessed Land, the people excluded from the Table where bread is served.

Our Noongar mother, like the Canaanite woman is pleading not for herself, and not only for her daughter – but for the future of her entire people.

Today in our nation, in this Land that was possessed, Land whose sovereignty has never been ceded, we as a nation, and as a church, are also hearing a plea for the future – a request for us to listen: the Voice to Parliament.

But thanks to the grace of our loving God, Her scripture, Her gospel has become alive today, and we ourselves are **in** the text!

We are actually in the Gospel; we are with Jesus and his Jewish disciples, being confronted by a Voice that simply wants us to listen, to include the excluded and free this living Land from possession.

We are being asked to give our Aboriginal sisters, brothers and companions a place at the table, to be heard, nothing more – just as the Gentiles at the time of the writing of our gospel wanted a place at the Lord’s table with the Jewish disciples.

And, being in the text, we see how we, as predominately white Australia have ignored this request for inclusion, this request to de-possess, just as the male disciples *and Jesus himself* ignores the pleas of the Canaanite mother. The request for a Voice, for recognition, for an Aboriginal place at the table has been repeated for decade upon decade upon decade, and we like Jesus have, in the past said, no, no and no.

In our Gospel, Jesus’s disciples urge him to send the Canaanite woman away. The original Greek word used here refers to divorce. This is why our “modern” version has the disciples urge Jesus to, ‘Get rid of her, break up with her.’ Referring to a break-up means there is already a *pre-established* relationship between Jesus and the woman, between the Jews and the Gentiles. We can’t divorce someone we are not married to.

And we – we in the text, we also profess a **preestablished** intimate connection between First and Second nations people in our country, because all people are made in the image of the same God and all of us are nurtured and sustained, every day, by the same Holy and Living Land.

But our possession of the Land, our concept of Terra Nullius, our White Australia Policy, the Stolen Generation and our endemic racism denies this holy relationship between first and second peoples. We have, like the disciples, wanted to break up, having nothing to do with our First Nations sisters, brothers and companions.

But God’s holy relationship, what She has created, cannot be denied, and Her will be done – as Christ himself shows us.

In the Gospel, the mother's pleas, and recognition of Jesus as Lord, are not initially responded to. Jesus is, instead siding with the male disciples, clearly on the side of exclusion, not inclusion, just we have excluded our First Nations people.

Now we as Christians profess Jesus as both fully divine and fully human. He is not simply God incarnate, but takes on our entire human nature also. And this means that it is not that he *could not* sin, but rather that he *did not* sin. It is not that he *could* not be ego-driven, could not be petty, could not be fearful, and could not be *racist* – but rather, that he *was* not.

And in our passage today, we see his *human* nature, identifying with and initially reproducing the prejudice and exclusion of Jewish culture against the Gentiles. It takes three repeated requests and shaming by the woman before he changes his mind, before his divine nature accedes to the request and the daughter is healed.

And we images of God, we in the text, we are called **not** to be the disciples, who exclude, but Jesus; Jesus who drawing on the love eternal, hears the pleas of the Noongar mother and changes – who despite initially saying no, no, no, now finally says 'Yes'.

As we can.

And when we do; when we say 'Yes', when we hear the Voice, then our Land and the future of our First nations people, will, like the Canaanite Daughter, be healed from that moment ... **In the Name of Christ. Amen. ✕**

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