



gospel

Mt 15:21-28

At that time, Jesus withdrew to the region of Tyre and Sidon.

And behold, a Canaanite woman of that district came and called out, "Have pity on me, Lord, Son of David!

My daughter is tormented by a demon."

But Jesus did not say a word in answer to her.

Jesus' disciples came and asked him,

"Send her away, for she keeps calling out after us."

He said in reply,

"I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel."

But the woman came and did Jesus homage, saying, "Lord, help me."

He said in reply,

"It is not right to take the food of the children and throw it to the dogs."

She said, "Please, Lord, for even the dogs eat the scraps that fall from the table of their masters."

Then Jesus said to her in reply,

"O woman, great is your faith!

Let it be done for you as you wish."

And the woman's daughter was healed from that hour.

REFLECTION

This week's gospel provides a fascinating illustration of Jesus' response to those in need. Jesus has travelled to the area of Tyre and Sidon – part of modern day Lebanon. He was physically removing himself from the place of his very active ministry and taking a break. When the Canaanite woman approaches Jesus and his disciples, she is an interruption; a nuisance. Jesus is very abrupt with her. He tells her simply that his ministry is to the house of Israel – the Jews - and is not for her. But the woman is persistent and again asks Jesus to help her. Jesus is even more abrupt and tells her that it is not right to take the food of the children and throw it to the dogs. Through this use of metaphor, Jesus refers to the children of Israel (the Jews) and to the gentiles and pagans - sometimes referred to as 'dogs' to reflect their lowly status in the eyes of the Jewish tradition. Still the woman persists and turns Jesus' metaphor back on him, saying that even the dogs get to eat the scraps that fall from the table.

The woman's persistence and faith pay off. Jesus is moved by her faith and through that faith heals the woman's daughter. Despite his initial abruptness and reluctance, Jesus responds with compassion to the woman's request. It is as though she needed to demonstrate that she was really serious and that she did in fact believe that Jesus could make a difference in her life and the life of her daughter. This is an important story in Matthew's gospel. This gospel was written predominantly for Jewish Christians but this story reveals that the ministry of Jesus and the reign of God is open to anyone who believes.

FROM THE PERSPECTIVE

OF A DISCIPLE

As we passed through a little village near Sidon this Canaanite woman suddenly started calling on the master to help her daughter. We all expected the master to help her out as usual but he really put her in her place! He told her that his ministry was not for pagans like her. That should have stopped her, but she kept on and on, even turning the master's words back on him! She was so rude. We were about to push her out of the way so that the master could move on when he suddenly told her that her faith was great and that her daughter was better. Great faith? A Canaanite? He never ceases to surprise us!

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

When Moses led the Israelites out of Egypt, the 'Promised Land' they sought was the land of Canaan (approximately the area of modern Israel, TransJordan, Syria and Lebanon). Here they were commanded to utterly destroy the Canaanites and to subdue the land. (Exodus 23:23-24) The Israelites never successfully removed all the Canaanites from the Palestine region. By the time of Jesus, the Israelites had established themselves in the region between Judea in the south and Galilee in the north, while the original inhabitants of the area had been 'squeezed out' – predominantly to the north. The Canaanites were dispossessed of their land by the Israelites and it is easy to see why there was tension between them.

- Q Why do you think Jesus first responded to the woman in the way he did?
- Q What turned Jesus' attitude around?
- Q What do you think the woman was thinking/feeling as she approached Jesus?
- Q What message would the followers of Jesus have taken from this event?
- Q What is the message of this Gospel passage for us today?