



The new SHOFAR

Ordinary Sunday 20

Matthew 15:21-28 - *View the world with Jesus' eyes*

What God sees is people not sinners

What is of greatest importance in this story is not the actual miracle performed by Jesus. There are many of them in the Gospels. What stands out is how it was a woman and more specifically a pagan woman who comes to Jesus. Jesus has moved into an area well known for its pagan activities and the word *Canaanite* was synonymous with *evil pagans*. They were the original inhabitants of the land who had been driven out by the Hebrew people and they were often used to represent all those who were opposed to Israel's God. They were the opposite of good and holy and righteous and this was made worse by the many terrible practices in which they engaged (sacred prostitution, child sacrifice, etc).

This is why it is so extraordinary to find Matthew recording the fact that a woman from among these pagan communities comes directly to Jesus. Matthew even highlights this for us when he says...*and behold a Canaanite woman...* Any Jew listening to this narrative would immediately sit up and begin to take notice. Jesus engaging with a much-hated *Canaanite* who was also a *woman* is not something to be missed. What's wrong with God!

Salvation is all about coming to Jesus with a humble and hope-filled faith

Even more amazing is the way this pagan woman three times addresses Jesus with the important title *Lord*. She calls him the *Son of David* an expression used when speaking of the Messiah. According to Matthew, (and he uses very strong language in the Greek) she is struggling with the disciples, resisting their efforts to move her on and silence her. She will come into the presence of the Messiah no matter what the challenges!

For what is she asking? "Mercy". This means she is demanding that Jesus take her seriously. She may only be a woman and a pagan woman at that but she deserves a sympathetic hearing from Jesus. Such a hearing would be shown through the healing of her daughter. She makes this request in the face of her ongoing battle with the disciples. This is a key part of the overall picture. The disciples keeping the sinners away from Jesus and no doubt doing it for what they consider to be righteous reasons. They know the mind of God.....?

Can God possibly love sinners – very evil sinners at that?

When Jesus finally speaks his message is extraordinary. Yes, he has come to the *lost sheep of the House of Israel*. That is the way the Jews understood the saving focus of God. God loves the Jews so, why would he be bothered about disgusting pagan women! Everything in this point goes the way the faithful Jews would expect things to pan out. The disciples would be thinking Jesus would now step in and dismiss the troublesome woman.

As she continues to battle the disciples her plea to Jesus also continues. She has absolutely no problems with the way God goes about the business of salvation. She can accept how the Jews might have a special place and pagans be relegated to the margins. She did not expect God would love such peoples in the same way. But surely there was some love for her.

Jesus challenges this woman and explores the level of her faith and understanding. He speaks in terms of not being able to throw *the bread of children* to the *lap dogs*. This *bread of children* in the Jewish tradition referred to the kinds of blessings and fulfilment that would be associated with the coming of the Messiah. They believed these blessings would be restricted to the Jews. Jesus goes on to further elaborate the situation with his metaphor. The *children* are the Jews and the *lap dogs* the pagans. These dogs are the puppies belonging to the many wild and diseased dogs that roamed around just about every village in the land. The situation is thus very clear, at least from the point of view of the righteous.

The Jews are special and are saved. The pagans are wicked and deserve all that will happen to them. But is this the Jesus we have come to know? Is this the way of the Kingdom as preached and witnessed to by Jesus?

In God all people (especially sinners) are loved, welcomed, healed and restored

The woman herself answers the question. Her faith in Jesus is such that she believes God, through his Son the Messiah, will feed both the Jews and the pagans, terrible though they may be in the eyes of some. Her faith is truly amazing and she stands out from the unbelieving Jews. Her words and actions proclaim an essential feature of the mission and ministry of Jesus: God loves all men and women, saints and sinners alike and has sent his Son to bring peace, mercy, love, joy and happiness to everyone...even those despised as being unworthy.

The way Matthew presents this story is important. We have a woman doing something that no woman would contemplate in the Palestine of that time – approaching a man on her own. To make matters worse, she is not just a Gentile, she is also a dreaded Canaanite – most pagan of pagans. She has no reason to believe that Jesus would welcome her let alone listen to her plea and grant her a request for the healing of her daughter. Yet she is a woman who is driven and it is this side of her life that touches Jesus. He knows her proper place in the world and that by talking with her he was risking his own reputation. She was unclean on so many levels.

The person Jesus saw and to whom he responded was to this mother in anguish. Clearly, she had reached the end of her ability to continue as she was and to find peace in her life. Her daughter was losing her battle with a demonic power that had overtaken her and she had nowhere else to go. It is not hard to hear the pain and anguish in her voice as she pleads with Jesus for divine assistance.

The disciples are unable to find anything deeper in her than “woman” and “Canaanite”, they are stuck at those externals and try to move her on. But she believed that Jesus was good and compassionate and so she persevered in her faith in him. While the Pharisees and the other religious leaders in Judaism struggled to see Jesus for who he was, this pagan woman somehow understood and believed. What she understood was that only a few of the “divine crumbs” were all she needed. She did not need the full divine banquet and she was not saying she deserved a banquet of any kind. To her was given the gift of healing. Her pain and anguish was heard by the compassionate Christ who reached out to a woman in pain; to this woman who believed that against all odds and expectations she was loved and cherished by God. In that way she stands out for all of us as a true model of discipleship – not the Pharisees, the doctors of the Law or even the Apostles. This pagan woman is for us discipleship in action.

The challenge for disciples in today’s Australia is to move beyond our readiness to see people in terms of their surface characteristics – a pain in the neck; lazy, arrogant; a druggie, an alcoholic; homeless, a refugee and so on. In Jesus, we are being called to dig deeper, dig even through the outer layers of people that so repel us and to find underneath these surface characteristics, a child of God, a person for whom Jesus died on the cross; a brother or sister.

