THE NEW SHOFAR

It is not the church that has a mission of salvation to fulfill in the world; it is the mission of the Son and the Spirit through the Father that includes the church.
Jürgen Moltmann

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Surely Canaanites cannot be saved!

Verse 21 of today's narrative from Matthew's gospel tells us that Jesus had wandered into the area of Tyre and Sidon. To most of his original readers, this was the equivalent of saying that Jesus had now entered the epicentre of paganism, the home of all that was truly evil. They had been slaughtering themselves with mutual enthusiasm and had remained the bitterest of enemies. The Hebrew people had been waging war against them from the time Jashua led them across the Jordan into the land of Canaan and meeting this woman would have brought all of that bitter history to the forefront of their minds. Jesus and the disciples were outside of any recognizably religious area and had entered a kind of spiritual slum, a veritable ghetto of unbelief. It was not a place Jews were likely to visit. It was diabolical. Unclean along with its inhabitants. The disciples were probably nervous being there. To their provincial minds, wandering into Tyre and Sidon felt spiritually dangerous.

Far too quickly their worst fears are realised. Suddenly an apparently crazy *Canaanite* woman runs up, screaming at the top of her lungs about her demon-possessed daughter. She was shrill, direct, presumptuous, and she had a problem with a demon, a problem that would have come as no surprise to the disciples!

Jesus uncharacteristically responds to her pleas with silence

Jesus said nothing, which probably made the disciples assume he was thinking the same thing they were: *how can we get out of this highly uncomfortable situation*?! Since Jesus' initial silence gave the disciples an opening, they express a desire to dump this woman immediately as her whining is all too much and offensive. Their complaints prompt Jesus to go on to say, either just to himself or to the disciples, *I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel*. It was a typically Jewish response. The Jews were chosen and the Gentiles were not. They were all unclean. Sinners.

We do not know whether she heard Jesus speak. If she did, it did not deter her in the least. What she did instead was assume a posture of worship - she knelt. From her position of humble submission, she begs Jesus to help her. A Canaanite!

In the previous chapter Jesus fed bread to 5,000 people. Immediately following this story, he will do something similar, feeding bread to 4,000 people. Jesus is the bread of life. His ministry is a kind of extended heavenly feeding. This woman is asking for a place at the table, begging to be "fed" and Jesus' response is stunning in its apparent brutality, its use of a crude racial epithet – a dog. Dogs were unclean, disgusting eaters of carrion and the refuse found in the rubbish dumps and sewers of the villages and towns. It was an appropriate term to be applied to a Syrophoenician woman, a hated Canaanite. Jesus reminds her of the very Jewish belief that he had been sent to the more worthy children of Israel and not to the Gentile masses. And of course, that was all true. It was only after Pentecost that the followers of Jesus were filled with the power

of the Holy Spirit empowering them to take the Good News of God's saving love to the very ends of the earth. But that was later when his followers would actively assume a shared ministry and mission with the Son in carrying out the Father's will.

Only in the West do we zero in on the abusive term "dog"

People today are much more concerned about that word "dog" than was the woman. Matthew's intent in including this miracle narrative in his Gospel was her witness to the power of faith, of her persistent willingness to come before the throne of God on her knees, acknowledging her need, her powerlessness before the evils and woes of a world in which Jesus has no place. She does not protest her spiritual canine status, choosing instead to weave it into her own counter argument: *Dog I may be but even mutts are entitled to a few crumbs from the master's banqueting table*! Jesus then expresses what is the core message of this engagement: *Woman, you have great faith and her daughter was released from her demon at that very moment*.

It is an annoyingly short narrative. Unfortunately, Matthew does not record more details of what happened next. Did he turn to the disciples and explain what had just unfolded? Did she follow him? At first Jesus pretended like he did not even see the woman. In fact, this is the only time in all the gospels when he ignored someone's cry. Then he claimed this woman was outside the scope of his concern.

I suspect that this engagement had been confusing to His disciples, for they have seen Him reach out to Gentiles and Samaritans before. He had willingly healed the servant of the Roman centurion (Matthew 8:5-13). He also offered the water of life to the Samaritan woman at Sychar (John 4). But now He refuses to help this woman simply because she is not of the house of Israel?! Or was he?

In Jesus, even "dogs" are shown mercy, have salvation

It was part of the Divine Truth revealed by God through the prophets of Israel, that the choosing of the Hebrew people was but an initial step in the plans Yahweh had for the salvation of all men and women. This pagan woman lived out that Truth, a Truth that permeates Scripture (though one often conveniently sidelined by the Jews) and is verbalized so beautifully in **Jeremiah 29:11-14**: "*For I know the plans I have for you", declares Yahweh, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future. Then you will call upon me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you. You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart. I will be found by you," declares Yahweh.* Like Jacob when wrestling with the Lord (**Genesis 32:26**), the woman would not let go of her persistent praying until he blessed her. She kept asking until she received, kept seeking until she found, and kept knocking until it was opened to her (**Matthew 7:7**).

In our ministry as disciples of Jesus this outsider, this terrible woman of Canaanite extraction challenges us by asking how inclusive are we of those who stand outside of our community, those who feel unwelcome or marginalised? Those supposed "dogs"? Society cannot flourish and the church cannot fully accomplish the work of the gospels when parts of our community are separated from one another.