

Matthew 15:21-28 An unexpected response

We pray...

Was anyone a little surprised when they heard the gospel reading today?
I'll start reading it again and let me know if you notice anything strange.

Leaving that place, Jesus withdrew to the region of Tyre and Sidon.

²² A Canaanite woman from that vicinity came to him, crying out, "Lord, Son of David, have mercy on me! My daughter is demon-possessed and suffering terribly."

²³ Jesus did not answer a word. So his disciples came to him and urged him, "Send her away, for she keeps crying out after us."

²⁴ He answered, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel."

²⁵ The woman came and knelt before him. "Lord, help me!" she said.

²⁶ He replied, "It is not right to take the children's bread and toss it to the dogs..."

Matthew 14:21-26

It sounds so strange doesn't it.

Here is a woman whose daughter is possessed by a demon and is suffering terribly. I expect many of you can empathise with her, you know the helpless feeling when your child is sick and suffering and there is nothing that you can do to help. And here, this woman in her desperation comes to Jesus. She begs him. She pleads with him. 'Have mercy on me!' 'Help me!'

And how did Jesus respond?

He doesn't even say a word. It seems he flat out ignores her.

As if that's not already enough, when the woman pleads again, Jesus seems to tell her that he won't help her because she's from the wrong nation.

Surely there must be some mistake here... Surely this isn't the Jesus we know...

But then, maybe you can relate to these words.

Have you ever had a time in your life where there was someone in your life who was suffering. A child, a parent, a friend.

In that moment, you cried out to Jesus, you pleaded with him, and as you listened out for an answer to your prayer, you didn't hear a single word.

Perhaps you even cried out to his disciples, you pleaded and cried to others in the church, but they were dismissive. They didn't hear your cries. They just turned you away.

Maybe you can see yourself in the shoes of this woman.

And for us today, this is precisely the power of this text.

But if we want to truly hear the words of this text today, if we want to feel their weight and hear where they lead us, we need to fully step into the shoes of this woman.

See, this woman, was a Canaanite.

The Canaanites were one of the great enemies of Israel, of God's people. They worshipped other gods, their lives were filled with all kinds of immorality, they even sacrificed their own children to their gods. This nation was so far turned against God and his people, that's its no surprise that they disciples want to send her away.

And then we hear Jesus' words:

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

Matthew 15:24

It seems that Jesus spoke these words not to the woman, but to the disciples. He says to them what they already know, the Messiah is here for Israel, for God's people, for those who are part of his covenant. Not for outsiders like this woman. No, outsiders like her, they will be the ones who are overthrown once the Messiah takes the throne! At least... That's what they were expecting.

But this woman fell to her knees, her face on the floor, as she pleaded all the more fervently...

Then Jesus' words seem to hit the hardest:

"It is not right to take the children's bread and toss it to the dogs."

Matthew 15:26

I mean, he's right isn't he?

Sure, we love our pets, but if the choice is between feeding our dog or feeding our children, it's a no-brainer!

God had made his covenants with Israel, not Canaan.

God's promise was to Abraham's offspring, that he would show them mercy.

So not only was Canaan outside of his promises, but they had turned so far away from him, they truly wanted nothing to do with him.

So why should God go out of his way for them?

They had no right to his mercy or his grace.

But then this woman responds with such wisdom and faith:

"Yes it is, Lord. Even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table."

Matthew 15:27

There is so much in these words that reveals to us this woman's heart.

'Yes it is, Lord'

Yes, you're right. We have no right to your mercy. We are outside of your promise. We are undeserving.

Then she goes on: 'Even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table.'

She acknowledges of Jesus: Yes, you are their Lord, but just the same, you are the Lord of the outsiders too.

You, Jesus, are Lord of all.

And I know I have no right to what you have come to give, but I would gladly eat of just the crumbs, because even that would be enough.

This woman comes before Jesus as a beggar, holding fast to the truth that he is the only one that can bring salvation to her daughter.

And this is where the truly unexpected happens. Jesus responds:

"Woman, you have great faith! Your request is granted."

Matthew 15:28

Do you remember what was said of faith last week?

When we heard of Peter, the great rock of the church stepping out of the boat and walking on the water with Jesus?

What did Jesus have to say about his faith?

'You of little faith'

But here, this outsider, this person who is meant to be God's enemy, is praised so plainly for her faith.

It's because she truly got it.

She knew what it was to be powerless before God, to give everything over to God, trusting in him. And it's here that we find ourselves.

It's so easy for us to fall into the trap of the 'I deserve...'

We trust in ourselves. We feel like we have everything under control.

And it's times like these where we may hear God's word, but it sounds all too harsh and stern. We don't want to hear it. But what he speaks, and what he doesn't speak, he does so to drive us all the more to faith in him.

It's in the times where we see the desperation, where we recognise that we aren't so trustworthy and reliable as we seem. When the world seems to fall apart around us. It's these moments that we realise just how much we depend on him.

And then what will we find?

Let me tell you, it's not crumbs.

We find a God who promises us: You are worth dying for.

We find the God of the cross, who willingly takes on the suffering and sin of the world so that you would have in him eternal salvation.

He prepares a place for you at the table, where you can feast with him in eternal life.

Yes, there will be times where you struggle to hear his voice.

Yes, there will be times when the miracles don't come, when the suffering continues, when your self-reliance starts to falter...

But on those days, you will find in him the assurance that his mercy and his grace will never fail.

So may the peace of God, which is far beyond our human understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.

♪ Jesus strong and kind

Pastor Jeremy Smith