

Great Faith Where None is Expected

Thomas Robinson, *Deeper with Jesus*, 8, March 30, 2014

Matthew 15:21-31 [Cf. Mk 7:24-30]

²¹ And Jesus went away from there and withdrew to the district of **Tyre and Sidon**.

²² And behold, a **Canaanite woman** from that region came out and was **crying**, “**Have mercy on me, O Lord, Son of David**; my **daughter** is severely **oppressed** by a demon.”

²³ But **he did not answer** her a word.

And his **disciples** came and begged him, saying, “**Send her away**, for she is crying out after us.”

²⁴ He answered, “I was sent only to **the lost sheep of the house of Israel**.”

²⁵ But she came and **knelt before him**, saying, “**Lord, help me**.”

²⁶ And he answered, “It is not good to take the **children’s bread** and throw it to the **dogs**.”

²⁷ She said, “Yes, **Lord**, that’s true because **the dogs are eating the fragments that fall from their lords’ table**.”

²⁸ Then Jesus answered her, “**O woman, great is your faith!** Be it done for you as you desire.” And **her daughter was healed** instantly.

²⁹ Jesus went on from there and walked beside the Sea of Galilee. And he went up on the mountain and sat down there.

³⁰ And **great crowds came to him**, bringing with them the **lame**, the **blind**, the **crippled**, the **mute**, and many others, and they put them at his feet, and he healed them, ³¹ so that the crowd wondered, when **they saw the mute speaking, the crippled healthy, the lame walking, and the blind seeing**. And they **glorified the God of Israel**.

Matthew 10:5-7

⁵ These twelve Jesus sent out, instructing them, “Go nowhere among the **Gentiles** and enter no town of the Samaritans, ⁶ but **go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel**. ⁷ And proclaim as you go, saying, **The kingdom of heaven is at hand**.”

Matthew 8:10-11 *Jesus and the Centurion from Capernaum*

¹⁰ When Jesus heard this, he marveled and said to those who followed him, “Truly, I tell you, with no one in Israel have **I found such faith**. ¹¹ I tell you, many will come from east and west and recline at table with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven....”

Matthew 28:18-19

¹⁸ And Jesus came and said to them, “**All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me**.

¹⁹ Go therefore and **make disciples of all nations**, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit....”

Romans 15:8-9

⁵ For I tell you that Christ became a servant to the circumcised to show God’s truthfulness, in order to confirm the promises given to the patriarchs, ⁹ and in order that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy. As it is written, “*Therefore I will praise you among the Gentiles, and sing to your name.*” (Ps 18:49)

Isaiah 35:4-6

⁴ Say to those who have an anxious heart, | “Be strong; fear not! | **Behold, your God | will come** with vengeance, | with the recompense of God. | **He will come and save you.**” | ⁵ Then the eyes of the **blind** shall be opened, | and the ears of the **deaf** unstopped; | ⁶ then shall the **lame** man leap like a deer, | and the tongue of the **mute** sing for joy.

The Challenge of an Unexpected Story

This is a grating story to find here in Matthew! This is a proclamation of Jesus, and he doesn't come off well. Without compassion. Prejudiced. Ethnic epithet! We know how it should go: Mother, suffering daughter: "Bring her to me!" Healing, overcoming Satan. Why not?

Instead: narrowness: "house of Israel" Ethnic prejudice and intolerance: "Dogs"!?. Why does Mt tell us that Jesus is compassionate (9:36 – "sheep without a shepherd" also 14:14; 15:32)?

We like the strong, persistent mother. She's not concerned about these barriers, only her child. She's like the Jesus we've been watching. What's going on? Why tell this story? Mt thinks we're smart enough to figure it out. I'm not so sure. Matthew tries to help us: "Canaanite" – purposely anachronistic. Ancient enemies. "Lord, Son of David." (12:23 "Can this be the Son of David?") It sounds artificial; words to catch attention. But we're too distant to notice.

Israel's Lost Sheep for the World of the Gentiles

Why does Jesus say he was sent to the "lost sheep of the house of Israel"? Is his work just for Jews? Is Mt just a Jewish gospel? No. Note the Centurion. See the Great commission.

Mt 15:1-21: Pharisees said Jesus isn't faithful enough to Jewish tradition. The Pharisees want Israel's real sheep, not the lost, rebellious ones, the sinners. That's one edge of Jesus' profile.

But when Jesus withdraws to Tyre and Sidon (paradigms of pagan sin: 11:21-22) he is not leaving Israel for a mission to the Gentiles, rather for solitude. The house of Israel is also his profile.

Jesus is at a crucial stage in an unfolding drama developing act by act. Often ignored. In Gen 12, God calls Abraham. That story opens events, covenants, language, imagery, understanding, deliverance, judgment of sin and alienation, hope, and promises that prepare for the Messiah.

Yes, the Gentiles, the whole world are always in God's purpose. But right now Jesus is showing Israel that God's fulfillment is breaking in, promises are being fulfilled, God's kingdom is arriving. It is not yet the time for the nations who know nothing of Israel's story, Israel's God.

Who is this Canaanite woman? Is she just parroting phrases? What can "Son of David" or "Lord" mean to her? Jesus hears her without responding. She comes to him. He challenges her with a hard parable/proverb. "Children's bread" – healing. "Dog" – one who does not, can't understand (pearls before pigs, 7:6). The woman shows that she understands completely. The Gentiles find nourishment and identity added into Israel's story. Wild olives grafted in (Rm 11:17-24).

Jesus' Healings as Signs of the In-breaking Kingdom and Resurrection Life

Jesus hears the woman's response, grasping and expanding his parable. He responds with praise: "Great is your faith!" You really do see what is happening! You as an outsider are ready to see yourself within the promises of Israel's Messiah, Son of David & Lord. The Canaanite joins with the story of the Israelites without losing her own identity. Ancient exclusion becomes inclusion.

Still, should it have been so hard? Isn't Jesus just supposed to be compassionate to everyone, to heal everyone? We tend to think of healing suffering as a generalized good that somehow ought to be fairly distributed to everyone. Jesus could heal anyone he wanted, couldn't he? Why not everyone? Why not end all suffering? Why not now? Why not me?

As with the Gentiles, the answer is yes, it's coming, but not yet. There is a yet unfolding history that we are within. Many more things have now happened – Jesus' death and resurrection – but the end is not yet. Jesus' healings were signs of the coming kingdom, promises fulfilled, not yet a change of the human condition. Jesus heals for people (even the Canaanite woman) who see their meaning. They glorify the God of Israel who opens resurrection life to all his creation.