

Pentecost 11 16<sup>th</sup> August 2020

Matthew 15:21-28

Contemplatio

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On the face of it, this is a very strange little story, where Jesus engages in a dispute with a Canaanite woman, appearing to be very remote from her suffering, before calling her a gentile dog. The story shocks us with Jesus' apparent rudeness and cultural arrogance. It discomforts us because we don't like to think of Jesus in this way. There are at least a couple of possibilities. Maybe he was having a really bad day and really *did* treat the woman this way. OR, maybe the story is a literary device to grab out attention and reveal how this woman is symbolically pivotal in a transformed understanding which came about in Matthew's mainly Jewish community about the meaning of Jesus not just for Jews but also for Gentiles.

To understand the significance of this encounter between the Jewish Jesus and the Gentile woman, we have to look at what comes immediately before and what comes immediately after. Doing this is important because the gospels are carefully structured to communicate theological themes. They don't just randomly string together anecdotes about Jesus's life.

If we look at what comes before and after today's text, we notice that this story of the encounter with the Canaanite woman sits *between* two feeding narratives – the feeding of the 5000 and the feeding of the 4000.

If we dig a bit deeper we notice that the feeding of the 5000 happens in Jewish territory. There are 12 basketfuls of broken pieces of bread left over, most likely a symbol of the 12 tribes of Israel. Here, the feeding of the 5000 is saying that Jesus the Messiah is reconstituting and feeding the 12 tribes of Israel.

Whereas the feeding of the 4000 happens either IN Gentile territory or at least with a good bulk of the crowd being Gentiles. One strong indicator of this is that the text says that the crowds, 'praised the God of Israel' (15:31), in contrast to other local gods.

So we have three part structure:

- Feeding of the 5000
- Jesus meeting the Canaanite Woman
- Feeding of the 4000

The trajectory of the story is that Jesus is blowing open the whole 'Kingdom of God project' from just a limited Jewish enterprise, to an inclusive vision of God's gift in Jesus to the whole world which was, of course, a fulfillment of the longstanding promise and vision seen by the prophet Isaiah where God says, "*I will make you (Israel) a light for the nations, to be my salvation to the ends of the earth*" (Isaiah 42 & 49). In the gospel story we find Jesus realising and fulfilling that promise. Isaiah was Jesus' favourite prophet and the one he quotes the most in his teaching.

So we've got this huge expansion of the Kingdom vision happening in Jesus – he is bringing about, or fulfilling in himself, the vocation (calling) for Israel to the light and life to the whole world. But there is always a potential dark side when we speak of a universal vision extending beyond our own culture. It is the temptation of domination of one culture over another. We have to look no further than the founding of the European cultures in Australia which involved the crushing of the

indigenous population by a militarily overwhelming force. Whoever has the biggest navy and the superior weapons wins.

This brings us to our last bit of digging into today's text. In Matthew's version of this story the woman is described as a Canaanite. That is a very old expression. It would be a bit like my calling a contemporary Norwegian person a Viking! A Jewish listener would know what was going on here because they had, to put it mildly 'history' with the Canaanites. Their attention would be drawn back to when Joshua entered Canaan.

A contrast is being set up between the way Joshua entered Canaan and way Jesus enters Gentile territory. Joshua and Jesus are the same name in Hebrew. Go back 1400 years when Joshua is about to lead the Israelites into Canaan, and Moses is giving them a little pep talk...Moses says:

*"When the Lord your God brings you into the land you are about to enter and occupy, and he clears away many nations before you – seven nations mightier and more numerous than you – and when the Lord your God gives them over to you and you defeat them, then you must utterly destroy them. Make no covenant with them and show them no mercy" (Deuteronomy 7:1-2).*

Joshua did what cultures throughout history do – he led an act of cultural genocide and justified it theologically. Sound familiar? Aboriginal people today read these the Canaanite conquest stories with quite a different lens to the nations who do the conquering.

In contrast, what happens with Jesus (the 2<sup>nd</sup> Joshua) when he meets the Canaanite woman? Initially he calls her a dog – which of course represents the traditional cultural approach - but then he allows her to convert him; allows her to teach him. Jesus engages with the Canaanites in the language of hospitality – by feeding 4000. Rather than destroying seven nations, there are seven baskets of broken pieces of bread left over, from the feeding of the seven nations.

The implications of all this links directly with the last verse of Matthew's gospel where Jesus says, *'Go and make disciples of all nations'*. Jesus clearly doesn't mean making disciples as an act of cultural imperialism at the end of a sword. Making disciples of Jesus is only ever to be done through Christians reflecting the abundant generosity and overwhelming gratuity of Jesus – including even quite mundane acts, like feeding people. The only conquering that Jesus ever does is kindness, even allowing himself to be conquered by the violence of Rome, and in being raised he pronounces a different kind of judgement – a judgement of forgiveness and mercy.

As one writer [Brian McClaren] has put it, "to repent, to believe, to follow Jesus means nothing less than defecting from Caesar's Campaign of violence in order to join Jesus' insurgency of divine peace".