

Sermon Trinity 10: August 16 2020

Matthew 15: 21

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

Our Gospel reading today, the story of the Canaanite woman, is probably one of the incidents in the New Testament we find the most challenging. At first sight Jesus seems to be behaving in a way that is not at all characteristic of him and, unless we encountered this story in the Gospels, we could not imagine Jesus behaving in this way.

When Jesus speaks it is apparently to exclude any possibility that he would heal the woman's daughter. Only when she cleverly answers back does he act. Is this really the same Jesus we know from the rest of the Gospels as the one who welcomed all-comers, who went out of his way to reach the outcasts in society, the marginalized and the sinners? The only way to answer this conundrum is to do what we always have to do when someone we know behaves in an uncharacteristic way. We have to find some means of understanding how this can be, how it is consistent with the person we know.

The story of the Canaanite woman is a narrative about boundaries and borders. Jesus travelled to the north of Galilee to what we now know as southern Lebanon. He came towards the edge of the area populated by Jews and one in which there was friction between Jew and Gentile. It would be a little like travelling today to the border between modern Israel and the Palestinian territories, or many other areas of the world where ethnic groups come into unfriendly contact.

For zealous Jews at the time this area was part of the promised land, part of the land God had given to Israel and Gentiles like the Canaanite woman should not be there. Zealous Jewish nationalists looked forward to the time when they would be able to drive such people out of the land and purify it from Gentile and idolatrous contamination, making it truly the Holy Land. It is of relevance that St. Matthew calls this woman a Canaanite and we recall the Canaanites of the Old Testament. The writers of the Old Testament viewed the Canaanites as being of little worth, a corrupt people that Israel was supposed to replace. The truth was probably more prosaic and it seems likely that many were absorbed into Jewry through inter-marriage. They were, nonetheless, the ancient enemy of Israel and the stories of their enmity were alive in the memories of first-century Jews. How could a faithful Jew like Jesus treat a Canaanite as though she were an Israelite? How could she cross that boundary between the people of God and the enemies of God?

The marvel is not that Jesus begins from the common position of Jewish exclusivity but that he ends by breaking out of it. It's not really that he is impressed by the logic of her argument, or by her wit or her skill in debate, but because Jesus sees faith in her words. He does not expect to find faith in a Gentile, he does not expect a Gentile to be already prepared to receive the blessings he brings. When Jesus sees the Canaanite woman's faith, he recognizes the work of God. By her faith she has crossed the boundary. She - though a Gentile - belongs to God's household. And conversely Jesus ventures over the disputed borderlands that divide Israel from her enemies, not as a

zealous Jewish nationalist to conquer, but to welcome and to include. Jesus habitually crossed boundaries between the righteous and sinners, respectable people and outcasts, venturing out of the fold to gather in the lost sheep. Jesus now also crosses the boundary between Jew and Gentile.

For the Christian, boundaries between people exist to be crossed. To belong to the people of God - the Jews - is not to be the object of God's exclusive love, but is to be the vehicle of God's inclusive love for all. Many Christians have been surprised to find faith in unexpected places. I have myself. Do we have boundaries beyond which we do not expect God to be at work? Are there sections of society, kinds of people, who will not be receptive to the Gospel of Christ? Are there people we assume we cannot help? If so, Jesus has crossed that boundary before us. If we are open to God's surprises, he will lead us across boundaries. The lesson that this remarkable Canaanite woman has for us, is that we must never think of ourselves or anyone else as beyond the power of God's love, God's mercy, God's help. We should follow the Canaanite woman boldly across the boundary and claim our place in the household of God. We shall always find Jesus ready to welcome and to help.

Amen

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