

Matthew 15:21-28

(St Andrew's Church, St Andrews, 15 August, 1999)

Our Gospel reading today - the story of the Canaanite woman - is probably one that we find rather disturbing. At first sight Jesus seems to be behaving in a way that is not at all characteristic of him. Unless we had this story in the Gospels we would surely not imagine Jesus ever behaving as he does in this story. When the woman asks for his help Jesus doesn't even answer her. He ignores her completely. He is, we might say, wilfully deaf to her heartfelt cry for help, even when she persists with it, refusing to take his silence for an answer. When Jesus does speak it is apparently to exclude any possibility that he would heal her daughter. Only when she cleverly answers back does he give in. This must be the only occasion in the Gospels when Jesus does not respond to a request for healing or exorcism. It isn't the only occasion when the disciples try to protect him from being pestered by people, but it is the only occasion when Jesus seems himself to want precisely that. 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 of society, the marginalized, the sinners? The only way to answer that is to do what we always have to do when someone we know behaves in an uncharacteristic way. We have to find some way of understanding how they can do that, how it is consistent with what we otherwise know of that person, how our mental portrait of that person may have to be revised to accommodate this surprising aspect of them. When the Jesus of the Gospel stories surprises us, we mustn't back away from that surprise, we must attend to it because it may well take us on to a fuller understanding of Jesus than we've had up till now.

The Canaanite woman's story is a story about boundaries and borders. Jesus has travelled north of Galilee to the area we now call southern Lebanon. He comes towards the edge of the area populated by Jews, to the disputed borderlands between Jew and Gentile. It would be a little like coming today to a border between modern Israel and the Palestinian territories. Or many other cases around the world where borders engender disputes and antagonisms. For zealous Jews in Jesus' time this area to the north of Galilee 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. Notice Matthew calls this woman a Canaanite, and remember the Canaanites of the OT. The Canaanites were the irredeemably corrupt people Israel was supposed to replace in the land. They were the most ancient enemy of Israel and the stories of their enmity were alive in the memories of first-century Jews. How could a faithful Jew, as Jesus was, a Jew for whom the Hebrew Bible was God's true and reliable word to his people, as it was for Jesus - how could a faithful Jew like Jesus treat a Canaanite as though she were an Israelite? How could he or she cross that boundary between the people of God and the enemies of God? The marvel is not really that Jesus begins from the common position of Jewish exclusivity but that he ends by breaking out of it.

This is a story in which we cannot evade Jesus' Jewishness. Gentile Christians have often wanted to evade Jesus' Jewishness. Too often we have tried to set Jesus apart from the Jewish people of his time, using them as a negative foil by which to

highlight Jesus' distinctiveness. There may well be a remnant of anti-Semitism in such attitudes. But in the story of the Canaanite woman, Jesus is not only typically Jewish in the attitude from which he begins; he is also acting in obedience to his mission from God. 'I was sent to the lost sheep of the house of Israel, and to them alone.' When Jesus ignores and refuses the woman, he is being faithful to that mission. He is refusing to be distracted from what God has given him to do. He is to gather the outcasts of Israel, not to minister to the Gentiles.

This does not make Jesus anti-Gentile, a narrowly nationalistic Jew. It's a question of Israel's priority. As even Paul, the great apostle to the Gentiles, put it: 'to the Jew first, then also to the Greek.' Israel has the priority in God's purpose for the world, but not for Israel's own sake alone, also precisely for the sake of the Gentiles. Israel's calling was to be a light to the nations, a blessing to all the nations, God's witness to the world, a city set on a hill for all to see and believe. Many Jews in Jesus' time expected that when Israel was truly herself, the special people God meant her to be, then the nations would turn to God and be blessed. That expectation Jesus shared, since it was deeply rooted in the prophecies of the Hebrew Bible. Jesus' own mission from God was to his own people, for the renewal and restoration of God's people Israel - precisely so that through the renewed Israel God's blessing could then come to the nations. For the sake of the nations as well as for Israel, Jesus was sent to the lost sheep of the house of Israel alone. He had no mandate to anticipate the time when Israel's blessing would reach the Gentiles.

So how does this remarkable woman, the Canaanite, with her irrepressible persistence in seeking Jesus' help, persuade him to make her an exception? Notice that Jesus speaks of the house of Israel: Israel is God's household in which he is the head of the household, a favourite image in Jesus' teaching. Continuing that image he says: 'It is not right to take the children's bread and give it to the dogs.' The children of the household have priority; the dogs must wait their turn. It would be wrong to take the children's food from their table to feed the dogs before the children have eaten their fill. The dogs will surely be fed, but the children must not be deprived for their sake.

'Dogs' in Jewish usage was a derogatory term for Gentiles. Usually the thought was of the pariah dogs who roamed the streets scavenging - dirty animals. Like such dogs, Gentiles were unclean because they ate unclean food and worshipped false gods. But not all dogs were pariah dogs. There were also household dogs, kept as watchdogs and pets, much as people keep dogs today. I don't think the dog-lovers I know would allow that 'dog' could be a derogatory term. Some of them might think it flattering for people to be compared with dogs.

The dogs who belonged to the household would of course be fed. But only when the children have finished their meal and then the leftovers could be given to the dogs. But Jesus the inspired parable-maker meets in this Gentile woman at last someone with something of his own talent for parabolic illustration. She doesn't tell another parable to counter his. She doesn't want to contradict him, only to point out a possibility he hasn't considered. So she extends his own parable. The dogs do not have to wait till the children have finished before getting anything at all to eat. They feed on the crumbs that fall to the floor while the children are eating. The children don't have to be deprived of their food if what the dogs eat is the crumbs they drop.

In other words, surely Jesus can help a Gentile like herself without detracting from his mission to Israel. Why does this reply succeed in getting Jesus to change his mind? It's not really that he's impressed by the logic of her argument or by her wit and skill in parabolic argument. It is because he sees **faith** in her words. He doesn't expect to find faith in a Gentile; he doesn't expect a Gentile to be already prepared, more than ready to receive the messianic blessings he brings to Israel. When Jesus sees the Canaanite woman's faith, Jesus recognizes the work of God and the will of God for him. By her faith she has crossed the boundary. She actually - 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 might, to conquer, to expel and to deprive - but to welcome and to include. Jesus, who habitually within Israel crossed the boundaries between righteous and sinners, respectable people and outcasts, venturing out of the fold to gather in the lost sheep - Jesus now, when he meets it, also crosses the boundary between Jew and Gentile.

Boundaries between people exist to be crossed. Even the boundaries God himself has set, like that between Jew and Gentile, exist not to keep people in or to keep people out, but to be crossed. To belong to the people of God is not to be the object of God's exclusive love, but to be the vehicle of God's inclusive love for all. Many a Christian evangelist or missionary has been surprised to find faith in unexpected places. Do we have boundaries beyond which we do not expect God to be at work? Are their sectors of society, kinds of people, who, we take for granted, 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.

But to conclude with the lesson that remarkable woman, the Canaanite, herself has for us - We must never think ourselves beyond the pale of God's love, God's mercy, God's help. If we feel rejected, excluded, ignored by God, we must not take his silence for an answer. We can 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.