

SERMON: Matthew 15.21-28: The Gift of Faith and the Power to Heal

Dear Father, we thank you for the gift of faith. No matter what we face in life we thank you for the saving grace and healing power of your Son, our Lord Jesus. Amen.

One thing I love about the Aussie character is the way we can sometimes say the rudest of things to each other and yet it is given and received with humour and even as a term of endearment. Often it's to encourage someone: a phrase that springs to mind is: "Go on you old bastard, you can do it!" 😊 The words are usually accompanied by a twinkle in the eye or a wry smile. And the amazing thing to me is that we get the real meaning straight away- rarely do we misinterpret what was said.

Some theologians consider that we have an example of that kind of interaction in the conversation between the Canaanite woman and Jesus. Whether or not that is the case, for me, their encounter raises three particular issues. Those issues are: the power of spiritual healing, the scope of Jesus's mission, and the gift of faith.

The Power of Spiritual Healing

So first, on the issue of spiritual healing, within the New Testament there are a number of examples of Jesus healing people of evil spirits. At the beginning of his ministry Matthew tells us in Chapter 4 verses 23 and 24 that Jesus cured all manner of illness, including demoniacs. Matthew chapter 8 verse 16 tells us he cast out the spirits of those possessed with demons. Another example is given in Matthew 8 verses 28 to 34 where Jesus casts out a legion of demons from two demoniacs into a herd of swine. And today we have the example in Matthew 15 of the daughter of the Canaanite woman being healed of demoniac possession. Indeed, in Matthew 10 verses 1 and 8, he also gave his disciples the authority to heal people of unclean spirits and cast out demons. Mark 16.17 extends this to all believers when Jesus tells the disciples: "*And these signs will accompany those who believe; by using my name they will cast out demons...*"

In the Roman Catholic church the practice of casting out demons became known as exorcism and more recently in Protestant churches, as deliverance. In 1614 Pope Paul V gave precise instructions to priests on how to perform an exorcism in his book "Rituale Romanum". It remains their church official canon and is largely unaltered to this day.

I raise this topic not to make us feel uncomfortable, although it quite possibly does. I raise it because it expresses a biblical truth that Jesus gave to us, and like all aspects of God's word, it has been given to us to aid our salvation.

I have no expertise or gifting in this area of spirituality and so I won't speak much more on it. What I will say though is, however much our post-modern, rational minds may be uneasy with and perhaps seek to reject the concept of deliverance from evil spiritual entities known as demons, I suggest that the bible invites us to consider it is a real aspect of our existence. It does not in any way undermine the crucial importance of medical, psychological, counselling and other professional support to address particular individual issues, **but** it does inveigle us to consider that for some people in some instances, there is a deeper spiritual level at play, a level that only the power of Jesus can heal.

The scope of Jesus's mission

The second issue I want to address is the scope of Jesus' mission. For Jesus to go to Tyre and Sidon was no accident. It was the only occasion on which Jesus was outside of Jewish territory and as verse 24 of today's reading reveals it was not for the purpose of evangelism. Theologians, such as R T France, suggest it was more of the nature of a 'retreat' to prepare himself and his disciples for what lay ahead. They needed to recover from the pressures of controversy from the Jewish leaders and his demanding popularity with the Jewish people. This region was the home of Gentile ancestral enemies of Israel, so no Jew would travel there. Earlier on in Chapter 15 Jesus tell the Israelites that their understanding of "clean" and "unclean" food needed to change: In verse 11 he explains: *"It's not what goes into your mouth that defiles a person but it is what comes out of the mouth that defiles."* Warren Wiersbe suggests that: *"Not only did Jesus teach that no foods were unclean, but he practiced his teaching by going into Gentile territory...the Gentiles were "unclean" as far as the Jews were concerned."*

William Barclay goes further in arguing that: "the supreme significance of this passage is that it foreshadows the going out of the gospel to the whole world." While Jesus makes it clear that his primary mission is to Israel, he also made many references that after his death and resurrection the good news of God's kingdom would spread to all the corners of the earth. And so this one encounter with the Canaanite woman plants the seed of later global mission.

The gift of faith

And that brings us to the third and final issue. From the description of this same miracle given in Mark 7. 24-30, it is apparent that the woman had hunted Jesus out at a time when he didn't really want to be found. Yet Jesus uses her approach to him to increase her faith. She starts by shouting out that he is "Lord, Son of David". The Greek words used here honour Jesus as an earthly master and the long awaited Jewish political Messiah, but a deeper understanding is needed.

So Jesus remains silent and the disciples urge him to send away this loud, persistent woman, constantly screaming at them as they went by. The Greek here could be read to imply that they were asking Jesus to quickly do as the woman was asking so they could be rid of her, but even that response is not exactly warm and inviting! And Jesus' reply of the need for him to focus on Israel, is equally discouraging. Rather than being put off though, these actions provoke a deeper faith. The woman gets down on her knees and desperately asks for the Lord's help. The Greek used here suggests she has moved from honouring a man to worshipping the divine. But still Jesus has more to give her. Whether or not his answer is delivered with a wry smile as I suggested at the beginning, to compare her to a dog remains a strong put down of the woman and reiterates the centrality of Jesus' mission to the Jewish people before his resurrection.

I suspect many of us would have been deterred by this point and walked away in disgust. But not this woman! Just as Jesus encouraged her to do, she threw it back at him. She called Jesus out by essentially saying: I know we Gentiles are not your priority. I know we're not considered worthy to even eat at the same table as the Jews. But you have the power to save my daughter. Surely, you can let me eat some crumbs fallen from the table. Surely you can share a little of your power in my daughter's hour of need!

It is this great faith that Jesus deliberately fostered and which he could no longer ignore! The woman's daughter was instantly healed. So what can we learn from this woman?

First and foremost, this woman was motivated by love. Her love for her afflicted daughter was stronger than any rebuffs she received from the disciples and even Jesus. Her love drew her closer to the source of all sacrificial love: our Lord. When our actions are based in love, we are given great power and insight through our loving Heavenly Father.

Secondly, this woman was given a faith that grew during her short time with Jesus. She began following a powerful man and ended on her knees worshipping a divine Lord. It was a faith that would not be discouraged, a faith that had an indomitable persistence. And it is this faith that is given by God, through the Holy Spirit, to all believers in Jesus who seek it.

To conclude my prayer is that, whether it be in times of greatest need or incredible gratitude, we too may fall on our knees and worship our Lord! May we be given the blessing of great faith and acknowledge His power to heal in ways far beyond our worldly expectations. AMEN.