

Matthew 15:21-28: Jesus & the Canaanite woman (16th August 2020)

So, what did everyone make of today's Bible readings? I must say, my first thought was: "Liz has chosen a good week to be on holiday, there's some tricky stuff in here".

For a start, in the Gospel, we've got Jesus behaving in what seems like a very 'un-Jesus-like' fashion – detached, reluctant, uncaring and rude (even)?

And then, the subject theme which seems to hold all three of the readings together, is the question of 'Israel, the specially-chosen nation', and what does that mean? It's a question which, having run throughout 2000 years of Old Testament history before Jesus came and threw it up in the air a bit, has remained very much a hot potato ever since, and of course still is today.

It's a question the apostle Paul went through a lot of angst trying to grapple with, in the three chapters of Romans (Chapters 9-11) ending with our Epistle passage today. Yes, he was abundantly clear (throughout his teaching) that the Christian message of salvation and new life in Jesus was for absolutely everyone – the Gentile (or non-Jew) equally with the Jew.

But the fact that most of the Jewish people had rejected Jesus really troubled him. Did that mean God had given up on that 'special relationship', and thrown away the Old Covenant with Israel?

No, Paul concludes, God can't do that – his promise is irrevocable. In his mercy, there must still be a way back, a place for the people of Israel, to join all the others in the new kingdom.

And then why, to support our Gospel and Epistle readings today, does the Church of England's lectionary pluck something out from Isaiah 56? Just because of those nice couple of verses about foreigners being brought and welcomed into a house of prayer for all nations? No, I don't think it's just that – at least I hope it's not!

Isaiah is a really fascinating book because it divides up into three sections of prophecies which were originally intended to relate (respectively) to the period before Israel's exile to Babylon, the period of the exile, and the period coming after the exile. But we can now see that they also relate to the period before Christ, the period of Christ's earthly ministry, and the period (we're in now) between the first and second comings of Christ.

And the second of these three sections of Isaiah – which contains lots of material about the 'servant', and in particular the 'suffering servant' who is Jesus dying for our sins – ends with chapter 55 (the passage we had in church a fortnight ago), and its pictures of abundant new life, associated with resurrection.

Chapter 56 is therefore the very beginning of this third and final, 'post-resurrection', section of Isaiah. And so, the focus in it, on the inclusion of foreigners, tells us that something very significant happened as an immediate result of Jesus' death and resurrection. As Paul puts it in another of his letters (Ephesians 2:14-16): on the cross, Jesus provided the way back to God, for both Jews and Gentiles, creating one new body (the Church).

Of course, the inclusion of the Gentiles was not a brand new idea that only surfaced for the very first time at the First Easter. It had always been God's plan – but until then the emphasis was primarily (although not exclusively) on the plan being worked out through the people of Israel being a light to the other nations.

So the point of all this, is to understand the context of today's Gospel story. The effect of Jesus' ministry was certainly to be for everyone in the whole world, in every era of time. But, his 'direct' (or 'immediate') ministry, as a man on earth before he went to the cross, was a time-defined, space-defined one – which was, essentially, to the Jewish people of around AD30.

And that might help us to appreciate better where Jesus was coming from in this meeting with the Canaanite woman, and why he might have said some of the things he did. So let's now have a closer look at the story, and the conversation.

To start with, how did Jesus come to be 'up north' in Tyre, on the Mediterranean coast (in what would now be Lebanon)? A deliberate 'missionary journey'? No, almost the opposite (it seems), a deliberate attempt to 'get away from it all', to spend some quiet time alone and with his disciples. Something he'd been trying to do for a while (since hearing of the death of John the Baptist) – but the crowds wouldn't let him.

According to Mark, Jesus is actually inside a private house when this local woman bursts in. She's a Canaanite – so would normally be a sworn enemy of the Jewish people, her ancestors having been thrown out when Israel moved into the Promised Land about 1400 years before.

We don't know exactly how she knew about Jesus. We do know though that earlier on in Jesus' ministry in Galilee, various people from towns and cities (including Tyre and Sidon) had heard about his healings and gone to check him out. And, doubtless, when they got back home, they had some stories to tell.

So when this woman – desperately concerned for her terribly-troubled child – finds out that this Jesus has unexpectedly turned up in her town, it's too good an opportunity to miss. Never mind that he's there on 'private retreat'; never mind that she knows he's the 'Son of David', the 'king of the Jews', and she's outside all of that; never mind that not even the greatest teachers could hold their ground in a theological debate with him.

She's not put off by being (seemingly) ignored. She's not put off by being 'outside scope' because she isn't a Jew. And she's not afraid to carry on arguing her case.

And Jesus? How does he respond? The Bible text handed down to us doesn't tell us what his body language was, or what his eyes were doing – was there, maybe, something of a 'twinkle' in them during this little exchange? Also, the original Bible text doesn't have any punctuation, so we don't actually know whether Jesus' statement "I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel" was in fact a question: "Am I sent only to the lost sheep of Israel"?

One way or another, though, Jesus was grappling with the situation in front of him. (We mustn't assume he always knew all the answers without having to work at it – just think of his anguished prayers in the Garden of Gethsemane...). And when the faith of the woman became absolutely clear, that (together with Jesus' compassion) trumped everything.

So what then might be some key takeaways from this passage for us today? Let me suggest three.

First – perhaps the most obvious one – is the importance of faith. In the end it wasn't just the woman's heartfelt concern for her child, her audacity, her persistence or her smartness in debate which 'won the day', it was her faith – as Jesus said, "Great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish".

That was a faith which Jesus had found to be sadly lacking in (most of) the Jewish people to whom he'd been sent. But this woman came to him in emptiness, with nothing to offer – except a conviction that he was 'The One' who could meet her deepest need.

Secondly, down a somewhat different tack, the story helps us to think about how we work out our plans and priorities. Jesus had a very particular calling – to come and live among the Jewish people, introduce them to God's new kingdom, and then (at the right time) to go to his death on the cross.

He had plenty of temptations ('good' and 'bad') to deviate from that, yet he kept his focus. But, that didn't mean he had absolutely no space for an occasional 'extra' when the need arose, when the circumstances demanded it.

Likewise, we need – as individuals and as a church body – to strike a wise balance (a tricky balance?) between identifying clearly what God's particular calling is for us (and then sticking faithfully to it), and having the openness and sensitivity to respond when God's Spirit is asking us to do something else for a while.

And finally, the story can encourage us to think about our attitudes on 'race', particularly pertinent of course at the moment with the 'Black Lives Matter' movement.

The New Testament letters spell it out – we all have an equal standing in Christ. (Galatians 3:28: "there is no longer Jew or Greek, slave or free, male and female – you are all one in Christ Jesus".) But, as we've seen, that 'New Testament' declaration comes against a background in which historically there had been a clear 'Jew/non-Jew' divide.

And so, not unexpectedly perhaps, the early Church took a while to get on board with this revolutionary idea, and what it meant in practice. Similarly, the Church today (and each of us individually) can be quite sincere in saying: "yes, we regard all men and women, black and white, equally" – without knowing what all the practical implications of that are.

And those practical implications will take us time, commitment and grace to work out – just like so much else...

So let's pray.