

Saturday, March 18, 2023
Season of Lent
Day 22

Matthew 15:21–28

²¹ Leaving that place, Jesus withdrew to the region of Tyre and Sidon. ²² A Canaanite woman from that vicinity came to him, crying out, “Lord, Son of David, have mercy on me! My daughter is demon-possessed and suffering terribly.”

²³ Jesus did not answer a word. So his disciples came to him and urged him, “Send her away, for she keeps crying out after us.”

²⁴ He answered, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel.”

²⁵ The woman came and knelt before him. “Lord, help me!” she said.

²⁶ He replied, “It is not right to take the children’s bread and toss it to the dogs.”

²⁷ “Yes it is, Lord,” she said. “Even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master’s table.”

²⁸ Then Jesus said to her, “Woman, you have great faith! Your request is granted.” And her daughter was healed at that moment.

Reflection

I think we have to begin by admitting we are more than a bit uncomfortable with this story of Jesus. There are people in pain and suffering, and he ignores them, refuses to help them, and makes use of a derogatory term. It seems the only reason he responds is the woman’s tenaciousness. I don’t know about you, but I immediately start looking for excuses to minimize what appears to me to be Jesus’s bad behaviour. How about you? Would you vote to remove this story if you could?

Well, that’s the wonderful and terrible thing about Scripture. It has been handed on to us as the word of God that is the only reliable witness to point us to the Word of God, Jesus in his fullness. We cannot posture ourselves over the text, but we are called to sit under the text. Rather than take control in our reading of the text, we must allow the text to read us. So, how would this text read if we give Jesus the benefit of the doubt as to being in the right?

Well to begin with, Matthew uses an odd term: “a Canaanite woman.” Very Old Testament. And then, the words coming out of her mouth: “Lord, Son of David.” She seems to have a great deal of insight as to who Jesus is and what he’s about! But, says Jesus—despite helping the odd Gentile in the past—my mission is to Israel (sheep; a traditional term). This isn’t a denial that the kingdom is for all, but—as Paul says—it’s for the Jews first and then also equally for the Gentiles. There is an order of revelation and we have seen Israel struggling for understanding. Jesus’s mission is to feed the children, Israel. It is the church’s job to feed the dogs (the nations). It isn’t flattering, but it was the common description of the day. This is part and parcel of Jesus’s fully humanness.

Where everything turns is on the woman’s reply: “the dogs eat from the crumbs of their master’s table.” Here we have to recall the discussion about “clean” and “unclean.” It’s not what goes in, but what comes out that demonstrates righteousness. This woman is not just mouthing the words in order to sell Jesus on helping her daughter, she really understands the nature of the kingdom. Because it is for all, there is no limit to whom it can feed. Her trust reveals that she is truly a part of the family of God. Jesus merely assents to her knowledge. The old lines of who was an insider and who an outsider are shown to be forever changed in light of the present kingdom.

So, what do we do with this? Well to begin with, our mission to the nations is re-inscribed to us. There are many who belong to the family of God and they are waiting to hear the word of welcoming invitation. We may even need to examine where some of our own prejudices lay. Are there people groups or groups of people we are dismissive of, thinking they could not belong to the kingdom? Are we ready to stop and listen to the voice of the Spirit of God to lead us into new territories? We might be surprised to find that the people we think will respond to the gospel don’t and the people we think won’t will. But, it all depends on us going and sharing.

Prayer

Lord, help us to put aside our assumptions about insiders and outsiders. May your kingdom be extended through us to all without distinction. Amen.