

Genesis 45:1-15; Matthew 15:21-28

*Grace and generosity*

I wonder if like me you find our passage from Matthew's Gospel this morning embarrassing at best and downright offensive at worst. Maybe, like me, you just wish it wasn't here or that Jesus had acted differently.

Jesus has just had one of his altercations with the Pharisees and scribes and now he heads off towards Gentile territory, right up on the northwest border of Israel. And here he is approached by this woman, this poor, desperate, Gentile, non-Jewish woman who cries out, 'Have mercy on me, Lord Son of David. My daughter is tormented by a demon.' The original word translated there as 'cries out' is a strong one. It can also be translated as 'scream' or 'shriek', and all the anguish and heartache of this woman and her terrible situation resound in that awful cry. And indeed in that cry we might hear echoes of other cries that are heard in the Gospel story, so many occasions when people turn to Jesus in moments of great anguish. And time and time again Jesus responds with compassion. This time, however, incredibly, this woman is met only by silence. We read, 'But he did not answer her at all.' And perhaps encouraged by Jesus' lack of response, the disciples start their clamour: 'Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us!' Get rid of her! And how we just long for Jesus to rebuke those disciples. Just a few chapters back a Roman centurion - a Gentile just like this woman - has come to Jesus and begged him to heal his servant. And Jesus speaks the word and the centurion returns home to find his servant well. And don't you just wish that Jesus would do the same here? Why can't he just say to her, 'Go home. You will find your daughter healed.' But no, just this silence, this cold shoulder, and then the insult. 'It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs.'

It's interesting that this woman is described by Matthew as a Canaanite. The Canaanites were the original inhabitants of the land that became Israel and were therefore regarded as Israel's ancient enemies who had been driven out. 'Canaanite' wasn't really a term that was used in Jesus' day and so Matthew seems almost to be upping the ante by calling her a Canaanite, casting her in the role of ancient enemy. But didn't Jesus tell us to love our enemies? Doesn't Jesus' command to love our enemies extend to Canaanites? Does compassion end when it reaches them? And does he have to call her a dog?

Well, we don't really know why Jesus reacted this way. Maybe he was tired, exhausted by the demands of the multitudes and could not face one more bleeding heart. All we can say, sadly, is that for whatever reason Jesus seems here to have been afflicted, uncharacteristically, by a limited grasp of grace. His reply to the woman about the children's food not being given to the dogs seems to assume that there is only so much grace to go round. It must be rationed, apportioned. It can't be stretched beyond Israel. And again the woman's reply is so sad: 'yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table.' Suddenly grace is reduced to crumbs fought over by dogs.

So it's a troubling incident, and in fact to understand this story properly we have to set it in context, noting the passages that surround it. So go back one chapter to Matthew 14 and we find there the story of the feeding of the 5000. You recall how Jesus fed over 5000 hungry people with a meagre 5 loaves and 2 fishes, and there were 12 baskets of leftovers were gathered up. All are fed with baskets of left-overs! Here grace abounds! God's abundance and generosity prevail! And that was done on Israelite territory – it was case of God feeding his ancient people on their home turf. But now jump ahead to the passage immediately after Jesus' encounter with this Caananite woman, the verses that follow immediately on from this story. We're told that as Jesus walked by the Sea of Galilee – now on the Gentile side of the Sea - great crowds came to him with the sick and lame, and Jesus had compassion in them. And there follows a re-enactment of the feeding of the 5000, only this time it's 4000 people and they're Gentiles and its 7 baskets of left-overs that are gathered up. And look what has happened: suddenly generosity and abundance are offered once again and bread is no longer reduced to crumbs fought for by dogs - it's freely offered to all, Gentile, Caananite, whoever - not least to those on the 'wrong' side of the lake.

Clearly this whole sequence of the feedings of the 5000, followed by the encounter with the Caananite woman, followed by the account of the feeding of the 4000 – this is all of a piece. It's all one unit. It's about bread and it's about grace – about grace given generously, and then reduced to crumbs, and then expanded again to fill 7 baskets. So what changed? Well, maybe it's Jesus that has changed. Maybe it's Jesus who had the grace and humility to learn from this feisty woman, to have his vision expanded at the point where it had become shrunk and limited for whatever reason. And I thank God that my

Saviour had the grace and humility to recognise when he was wrong and where he needed to be corrected – even by a despised ‘dog’ of a Gentile woman - because time and time again I need to acknowledge when I am in the wrong and need to submit to the correction of someone else. And perhaps it’s the same for you. It’s what we call repentance: the ability to recognise and to admit when we are in the wrong and to be corrected. It lies at the very heart of our faith. And it’s an ability that needs to extend beyond the personal realm and into our politics.

I know I’m treading on dangerous ground here but this past week there has been the controversy in the USA about the removal of statues of former Confederate generals and leaders and the reaction to that. Well, these statues are symbols of where America went wrong. These statues are not objects of beauty – they perpetuate memories of America’s sins. And to remove them is an act of repentance. And thank God for the people of Charlottesville who had the grace and the humility to recognise where their ancestors were in the wrong and to take these statues down. But of course the reaction is predictable because grace and humility are in short supply in the corridors of power.

And of course this week there have been the dreadful attacks on Barcelona and more precious lives lost, and we are at a loss to understand such demonic evil. And nothing could ever begin to justify such outrages, but how do we explain the hatred that fills the hearts of these murders? Where does it come from? Why do they hate us so much? And in accounting for such hostility and resentment, surely somewhere we must recognise the unacknowledged, unconfessed sins of imperialism perpetrated by western powers, that has left such a residue of anger and resentment. What would it mean for us to confess to where we have been in the wrong in the ways we have grabbed for power and influence in the world at cost to others?

Well, to return to the story of Jesus and the Canaanite woman, maybe there is more to glean. You see, for all Jesus’ apparent lack of grace towards this woman, he could justify his response, his refusal to heal her daughter. What we have to understand is that the focus of Jesus’ ministry was on the people of Israel. His purpose was to call them back to faithfulness and obedience and only then, through them, to reach out to the world. Jesus’ strategy was to call Israel back to its true calling as the special people of God and then, through them, the rest of the world would be blessed. And hence his priority and his pre-occupation with Israel: it was crucial to his ministry. And that meant that Jesus could justify

his cold-shouldering of this poor woman. He could defend his side-lining of her. It made sense.

Well, all that is true, but it doesn't get Jesus off the hook, for the simple truth is that grace calls us to go further than that. Grace urges us to go beyond what is justifiable and defensible. Grace is not satisfied with the justifiable, it prompts us on to the generous. Think of our other reading this morning, from the Book of Genesis. It's about a man called Joseph who had been treated very badly indeed by his brothers. Because they disliked him they sold him as a slave in Egypt and they thought that they were done with him. But by a strange sequence of events Joseph rises to a position of power and responsibility in Egypt, and from there he is able to mitigate the effects of a disastrous famine that strikes the whole region. And when Joseph's brothers come to Egypt to beg for grain they find themselves face to face with their brother who they had wronged but who they do not recognise, though he recognises them. And this is payback time. This is the dramatic moment of revenge for Joseph. He would have been so justified in punishing his brothers. He would have been so justified in bringing them to justice for what they did to him. But in this moment of vengeance and retribution grace strikes. In this moment grace shatters the anger and the recrimination and the hurt and enables Joseph to reframe and to reinterpret the whole sad story. Joseph re-reads his brothers' shameful actions in the light of grace. So instead of saying 'you wicked people sold me into slavery here' he says 'God sent me before you to preserve life...'; and instead of blaming them for their wickedness he says 'it was not you who sent me here but God...' There is a generous heart, a gracious and forgiving heart that pours out as Joseph's kisses his brothers and weeps upon them.

You see, there is action that is justifiable, defensible, - but then there is grace. Punishing Joseph's brothers would have been entirely justifiable - but then there was grace. Jesus brushing off this desperate woman was justifiable - but her response - 'even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table': this was the call of grace to break new ground.

And that same generous grace continues to call us. That person who has wronged you and upset you - of course you are justified in shunning them. That person who you have forgiven countless times: how on earth can you be expected to forgive again? That person who has let you down, why should you ever trust them again? But grace calls you to go further than that. 'Do it again!' 'One more

time!' That's what we learn from Joseph. And it was what Jesus taught. But it may well be that he had this woman to thank for showing it to him. Amen.