

## An uncomfortable story

Sermon for 10<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Trinity by Kandis Douglas on Matthew 15: (10-20) 21-28

This week on social media I came across a collection of pictures of church pews with the following notices...

*I have prepared a place for you – just not this pew*

*Jesus sat the 5000 down in rows – just not this one*

*Zacchaeus climbed a sycamore tree to get a better view – this is not it*

*Reserved for Elijah only*

*You will find me when you seek me – just not in this pew*

*Remember when God put a flaming sword at the entrance to the garden of Eden to bar Adam and Eve – translate flaming sword as blue tape!*

*Jesus said take up your cross - not this pew*

These notices were found in the Redeemer Presbyterian Church in New Orleans to encourage social distancing, but would I have been so comfortable with these jokes if they had been used to reserve an individual's seating preference?

Our reading today may make us feel uncomfortable as Matthew recounts the interaction between the Canaanite woman and Jesus. Let's unpack the context for this conversation a little.

We can see from the opening verses of our reading Jesus has had a difficult conversation with the Jewish church leaders, the Pharisees and teachers of the law. They were challenging Jesus leadership for his followers did not observe the tradition of the elders – from our reading this morning can see that the Jewish leaders were focused on outward rituals as signs of holiness – but Jesus was focused on the heart, on inner signs of holiness. For Jesus, what matters is not so much ritual observance as the things which motivate us to action – it is our heart, our desires and motivations which make people unclean.

Our reading then says Jesus withdrew – this was not unusual for Jesus as there were a number of occasions when Jesus withdrew. But on this occasion Matthew makes it clear Jesus had not only withdrawn from people, but he had withdrawn from his home territory – to Tyre and Sidon.

So, what do we know about Tyre and Sidon? The Old Testament shows us that this region presented a military challenge to the Children of Israel, but perhaps of greater concern was that they were thoroughly pagan and corrupt and therefore represented a threat to the purity of Israel.

Some commentators draw attention to the timing of Jesus withdrawal at this point in Matthew's gospel. They suggest Jesus withdrawal relates to his overall mission that his popularity is growing as he tends to the needs of the sheep without a shepherd – but so too is his opposition, the Jewish leaders who recognise Jesus as a threat – so he withdraws to control the timing of events - it is too early to be proclaimed king – it is too early to submit to the trial. Others suggest Jesus may want a rest before the final confrontation. Neither here in Matthew, nor in Mark's account of this incident, is it made clear. Though it does seem to be a significant moment. For Jesus is confronted by a gentile – a non-Jew – who is seeking him out just as the religious leaders are rejecting him.

Now turning our attention to the Canaanite woman. She really doesn't have a lot going for her does she? She is not a Jew, so cannot expect support on the grounds of race. She is a woman, so should not really be speaking with a man. She has a sick child whom she is unable to cure.

Yet she seems to have understanding or insight which escapes the Jewish religious leaders. The woman recognised Jesus:

- she recognised him as someone special, his fame seems to have spread beyond the Jewish border
- she recognised him as the Messiah to the Jews for she addressed him as Son of David
- She recognised him as the miracle worker as she came to him seeking healing for her child

Here in this pagan land is a woman of faith – a woman who had an assurance of things hoped for – a conviction of things not seen.

Her first appeal was to his kingship – the title son of David he identified him as King of the Jews

Matthew's account makes it clear that an appeal on the grounds of a covenant relationship does not extend to her, she is not a Jew, she has no part in the covenant relationship.

Now the language used by Matthew does not sit well in our ears, and rightly so, but at the time Matthew was writing, and to the ears of the Jewish Christian audience to whom he wrote, the language would be familiar and not considered racist. I guess today we would describe it as an unconscious bias. The term dog certainly brings into sharp focus the distance between those who were part of the covenant promise and those who were not. Might this difficult conversation help to bring around a paradigm shift in the Jewish thinking – that the grace which was first revealed to them - is also for the whole world?

Her second appeal was to God's abundant grace and infinite mercy. She recognised that God's grace was greater than the needs of God's covenant people – there is an abundance – God's grace is not about sufficiency but about excess. The provision is so large it falls off the plate on to the table then onto the floor. You know when you have a small cake – you make sure you gather all the crumbs leaving the plate as clean as it was before the cake?

Her second appeal also demonstrated her humility – she wanted what only God could provide – she had no delusions of grandeur – on appeal based on right – in humility she appealed for that which the Children of Israel had left, did not want, had rejected.

Matthew has led us through Jesus ministry, his calling first to the people of the covenant relationship, to the Jews. Here he starts to reveal the truth that while Jesus came first to the Jews he also came to the Gentiles. Words which culminate at the end of Matthew with the great commission "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations."

The question I find myself asking is who represents the Canaanite woman today? Who would I discount or leave out? Where are my prejudices? How might I extend the invitation I have received to them?

A second would be, are there things in life which need God's grace? Have I forgotten his abundance or is it that I do not really believe that there is abundance of grace for me? Yes, there are those who live acceptable lives – who follow the laws of elders – but me?