



The Methodist Church

Nottingham North East Circuit - Sunday 16th August 2020

This short act of worship, based on the service which would have been held at Church today, has been prepared for you by Rev John Wiseman, to use at home. If you are well enough, why not spend a few moments with God, knowing that other people are sharing this act of worship with you.

**Let's begin by singing together
a familiar favourite STF 56**

King of glory, King of peace,
I will love Thee;
And that love may never cease,
I will move Thee.
Thou hast granted my request,
Thou hast heard me;
Thou didst note my working breast,
Thou hast spared me.

Wherefore with my utmost art
I will sing Thee,
And the cream of all my heart
I will bring Thee.
Though my sins against me cried,
Thou alone didst clear me;
And alone, when they replied,
Thou didst hear me.

Seven whole days, not one in seven,
I will praise Thee;
In my heart, though not in Heaven,
I can raise Thee.
Small it is, in this poor sort
To enroll Thee:
E'en eternity's too short
To extol Thee.

Opening prayer:

O God, You are our God, the One in whom we trust.

We've gathered together today to worship You—
to open our hearts and minds to Your presence.
We long to meet You here, and to hear Your voice.

We come with confidence,
because we've met You here before;
we've been awed and inspired by Your glory and
Your power.
We come with gratitude,

because we've known Your steadfast love—
a love which is better than life itself.

And so we praise You—
lifting our voices, lifting our hands
in joy and expectation.

Come among us in Your power.
Pour out Your spirit on our thirsty souls,
that we may be filled with Your goodness and
love. Amen.

This morning's reading: Matthew 15:21-28

²¹ Jesus left that place and went off to the territory near the cities of Tyre and Sidon. ²² A Canaanite woman who lived in that region came to him. "Son of David!" she cried out. "Have mercy on me, sir! My daughter has a demon and is in a terrible condition."

²³ But Jesus did not say a word to her. His disciples came to him and begged him, "Send her away! She is following us and making all this noise!" ²⁴ Then Jesus replied, "I have been sent only to the lost sheep of the people of Israel."

²⁵ At this the woman came and fell at his feet. "Help me, sir!" she said. ²⁶ Jesus answered, "It isn't right to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." ²⁷ "That's true, sir," she answered, "but even the dogs eat the leftovers that fall from their masters' table."

²⁸ So Jesus answered her, "You are a woman of great faith! What you want will be done for you." And at that very moment her daughter was healed.

Let's sing again....a new hymn but sung to the familiar tune of Slane 'Be thou my vision'

She came to Jesus from outside the fold —
A Canaanite woman! Persistent and bold!
Looking to Jesus, she wanted to see
One who would help her and set her child free.

Claiming a blessing, a touch of God's grace,
She knew that God's love is not bounded by place.
Jesus, you listened, debated — then healed —
For in her asking, her faith was revealed.

God, you still bless those who seek you in prayer.
For you welcome dreamers who faithfully dare.
In Jesus, now risen, your mercy extends:
To those on the outside now welcomed as friends.

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Today's message

I wonder how many people here today have ever read something in the bible that they found difficult to understand?

I wonder how many people here today have ever read something in the bible that they understood but found it very difficult to put into practice?

I wonder how many people here today have ever read something in the bible that they understood but perhaps hoped that they had misunderstood and that there might be some other way of looking at the verse, passage or story that made it easier to digest, easier to understand, easier to associate with the kind of Jesus they wanted to believe in

I have had that experience this week with the story we have heard read from Mark's gospel. The story of Jesus encounter with the Canaanite woman

When reading through the story for the first time it could be thought and understood to suggest that Jesus had set out from Jerusalem travelling north to the vicinity of Tyre as part of a mission to the Gentiles, as an expansion of his ministry. Unfortunately this is not the case. Indeed there is little if anything in Mark's gospel to suggest that Jesus had a mission to / for the Gentiles. Jesus has in fact gone to escape. Jesus is trying to step back out of the spotlights glare. Away from the scribes

are Pharisees who have branded him a friend of sinners, away from the menace of Herod, escape from the constant clamour of the crowds who have witnessed the healings and the miracles.

Indeed he appears to enter a house precisely to increase the chances of his current location being kept a secret; Jesus wants some privacy and sees this as the best option. Indeed the Greek states he wanted no one to know.

And yet even here on foreign soil news about Jesus has spread and almost before he has had time to sit down before a woman throws herself at his feet. Although perhaps it might be more appropriate to say she gets right up in his face.

Within moment social conventions have been dismantled as this Greek, this Gentile, this Canaanite woman, this mother who has a sick daughter possessed by an evil spirit, pleads with Jesus begging him to heal her daughter. She throws herself at his feet not in an act of worship but in an expression of desperation, in an expectation of this being her last chance, her last hope

In the ancient world it was deemed improper for a woman to directly address a man, even more improper to address a rabbi or religious teacher but in this story it is the woman uncharacteristically initiates the conversation She has no business being in the company of a Jew, much less the Messiah. The social gap is cavernous.

And just as we are all expecting Jesus to simply reach out, extend his hand, speak words of love, words of compassion, words of healing. Jesus says

"First let all the children eat all they want, for it is not right to take the children's bread and toss it to their dogs"

Whilst I am reliably informed that in Greek the phrase Jesus uses can be viewed as little dogs or puppies, the Hebrew or Aramaic has no corresponding form

In the hope of discovering that this phrase meant something I hadn't realized I consulted at least 7

different commentaries in my study. All of them came back with the same answer.

Jesus calls the woman or at least refers to her as a dog....a term that Jews regularly used to abuse and ridicule their Gentile neighbours. Dogs viewed as scavengers, as wild, as unclean animals not as nice domesticated household pets. And to all of these biblical scholars it didn't seem to matter whether it was a small dog or a large dog, a miniature poodle or a great Dane, a dog is a dog is a dog.

This is not the gentle Jesus meek and mild that we sometimes sing about.

This does not appear to be the all compassionate Jesus I like to preach about. It is not even Jesus the counter culture revolutionary who turns the concepts of the world upside down and inside out.

This is an altogether different Jesus who initially does not seem to care for the plight of the woman, the condition of her daughter, answering her plea for help with something that whichever way I look at it, or the various commentaries I checked all say is an insult.

Jesus' referring to Gentiles as dogs and bracketing this Canaanite woman in that same category is clearly this is one of those difficult gospel moments with which Christians must wrestle. Who is this Jesus who is scornful of other nationalities and religions? What kind of saviour doesn't want to heal a young girl simply because of who her family is? What are we to do with such an indifferent and despising Christ?

Some indeed perhaps many would have chosen to ignore this part of the reading altogether and chosen instead to preach on how Jesus heals the deaf and mute man. That would in one way solve the problem of the difficult passage earlier...by ignoring it. Just as Jesus could simply have chosen to ignore the woman. Just as the woman could have chosen to ignore the plights of her daughter.

But neither of them did that and so I chose not to ignore it either

Many would have stopped at that rebuke. Many would have hidden away. Many would have slunk back into the shadows. But not this woman. Not

this gentile. Not this Canaanite woman. Not this mother

This woman had faith. Faith that sustained her when she met the first obstacle. Faith that did not melt when faced with the first problem. Faith that did not crumble when the pressure increased. Faith that did not shatter into 1000 pieces at the first rejection. Faith that meant she believed Jesus could offer her, indeed would offer her and her daughter something that all the other doctors, healers, faith practitioners had failed to do

Dog indeed! She keeps right on nipping at Jesus' heels, like an angry Jack Russell, she answers Jesus with the speed of a greyhound out of the traps, she keeps hold of her dream, her plea, her need as tightly as a dog would hold onto a juicy bone.

She dares to take his metaphor and turn it back on him. Far from being knocked back, knocked down, knocked out the woman once again seizes the initiative using Jesus own words as part of her argument.

She knows and acknowledges that the children / the Jews must be fed first, knows that they are being fed by what she has heard ...but is also aware that there will be such an abundance left over for people such as her. Something that has been admirably demonstrated by the feeding of the 5, 000 earlier Mark chapter 6.

Much in the way that there were 12 baskets of fish and broken left over after everyone had eaten their fill so the woman is sure there will be crumbs left over even for the likes of her. For the dogs gathered around the table

She argues that even on his own terms, Jesus can and should offer her something--some scrap of grace--for someone like her who comes to him in faith. She is challenging him. "What are you going to do, Lord: Judge me by externals only--or judge me by my heart?"

Earlier on in Mark chapter 7 Jesus has engaged the Pharisees in a debate about what is clean and unclean. It is not what you eat that makes you unclean says Jesus for that does not go into your heart but stomach. Rather what makes you unclean is what comes from your heart...evil

thoughts, sexual immorality, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly.

You cannot judge a book by its cover; you must look beyond external factors like nationality or religious heritage or social position to get the real story. You must look inside. Look at their hearts. Look at their faith.

Impressed by her answer, by her persistence, by her faith, Jesus heals her daughter simply saying that she can go for the demon has left the child.(a long-distance, third-party healing no less) Jesus expands the circle of God's mercy to include those once considered outsiders. Jesus opens himself up to welcome all that put their faith in him.

This becomes the day that the gospel of Jesus Christ, the good news goes to the dogs. A day where the traditions of the elders and the religious law could see only an outcast, but one on which Jesus sees inside, sees the woman's heart, see her faith. Old barriers, old restrictions, old understandings, old taboos were being swept away

It is not so much the story of a healing but more of a political incident and a clarification of Jesus mission. Jesus is conscious during his ministry that his primary role is not to spread the gospel to the Gentile world but to tell the Jewish people that their long awaited deliverance was at hand and indeed to bring it about by completing his vocation in Jerusalem

Jesus believed as any Jew of his day would that when Israel was redeemed the rest of the world would be brought in under the saving grace of the world's creator, the God of Israel, Yahweh. All that would happen in time but Jesus could not afford to be distracted from his primary task

He had after all not come north out of Jewish territory to preach and heal but simply to lie low. Any publicity as a result of an extended healing ministry in Gentile regions would have sent the wrong message, that Jesus was simply this great itinerant medical worker rather than the promised Messiah about to initiate the kingdom of God. Jesus apparent insult to the woman is difficult to explain away and perhaps we should not try to do that, should not try to reduce its impact, should not attempt to diminish its effect.

For in many ways it just emphasizes what the Canaanite woman already knows, that Jesus' mission. is to usher in and to inaugurate the kingdom of God first and primarily to the Jews and as a result of that or as we later discover by their rejection of his message then to the Gentiles. Indeed is this a forerunner of how Paul later describes the mission of the early church later in Romans 1:16 when he says I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile.

And here in a small way the dogs, the outsiders, the non Jews were already being offered crumbs from under the table. It wouldn't be too long before they would be sat at the same table as the children. Indeed it wouldn't be that many years before they would be the only ones there

And what is the connection between us and a story told about an encounter between Jesus and a Canaanite woman over 2000 years ago.

Well I ask you to simply consider words that we will say a little later in our communion service. As we gather around this table to share bread and wine together. As we will say

"We do not presume to come to this thy Table, O merciful Lord, trusting in our own righteousness, but in thy manifold and great mercies. We are not worthy so much as to gather up the crumbs under thy Table. But thou art the same Lord whose property is always to have mercy. Grant us therefore, gracious Lord, so to eat the flesh of thy dear Son Jesus Christ, and to drink his blood, that we may evermore dwell in him, and he in us.

Each of us will come undeserving of the love of God. Each of us will come broken by our faults and failures. Each of us will come knowing like the Canaanite woman happy even if we get a few crumbs.

And yet we are invited to come. Come with whatever faith we have in our hearts. Come just as we are. Come not to search out the left overs....but to take our full part, at this table, to be made whole as we receive just a foretaste of the heavenly banquet that is still to come. **Amen**

Prayers of Intercessions

We pray for...

- The stories that have been dominating our newspapers over the past week
- All those in need of healing, physically, mentally and spiritually
- For those who feel like second class citizens
- For those working to break down barriers and divisions
 - For the place where you live
 - For your church family
 - For those you love and those you sometimes struggle to love

And finally we join our voices to say The Lord's Prayer together...Our Father

Let's conclude this worship by singing STF 585

God whose love is all around us,
who in Jesus sought and found us,
who to freedom new unbound us,
keep our hearts with joy aflame.

For the sacramental breaking,
for the honour of partaking,
for your life, our lives re-making,
young and old, we praise your name.

From the service of this table,
lead us to a life more stable,
for our witness make us able;
blessings on our work we claim.

Through our calling closely knitted,
daily to your praise committed,
for a life of service fitted,
let us now your love proclaim.

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A final blessing...

As we have gathered in time and space, we now scatter once again, but remain bound together by the love and faith we share in Jesus. Amen.