



Parish of Finchampstead and California

week 3 – from 8 March 2015

LENT WELL SPENT ... in the Name of Jesus: Son of David

Gospel reading – Matthew 15:21-28

²¹ Jesus went away to the district of Tyre and Sidon. ²² Just then a Canaanite woman from that region came out and started shouting, 'Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon.' ²³ But he did not answer her at all. And his disciples came and urged him, saying, 'Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us.' ²⁴ He answered, 'I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.' ²⁵ But she came and knelt before him, saying, 'Lord, help me.' ²⁶ He answered, 'It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs.' ²⁷ She said, 'Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table.' ²⁸ Then Jesus answered her, 'Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.' And her daughter was healed instantly.

Context and background

This incident, which on the surface appears to show Jesus in an unusually harsh light, follows a long section (15:1-20) in which Jesus distinguishes between ritual uncleanness (which doesn't matter) and uncleanness of the heart (which does). That teaching was aimed at the disciples, and their preconceptions are an important element in today's account.

There are some similarities between this incident and Elijah's encounter with the widow at Zarephath (1 Kings 17:8-24) - a Gentile woman, a foreign country, a test of faith, a child restored.

The district of Tyre and Sidon was not Jewish territory. There were trading links with Galilee but also, quite likely, an underlying wariness across the frontier of neighbouring peoples. From a Jewish perspective anyway, all Gentiles were second-class.

And yet the woman addresses Jesus in a very Jewish way - *Son of David* implied heritage if not necessarily status. As we saw last week in the context of Jesus as *Messiah*, King David had been promised the throne of Israel for himself and his descendents. After the Babylonian exile there was a hope that the kingdom would be restored (see eg Jeremiah 30:9,21; 33:14-15; Ezekiel 34:23-24).

As with *Messiah*, *Son of David* was not a description that Jesus used of himself, though he does not contest its use by others (see also Matthew 9:27; 12:23; 21:9,15). In terms of its implications *Son of David* is similar to *Messiah*.

David as Jesus' ancestor seems to have been accepted by Christians from very early on (see Romans 1:3). Matthew (ch 1) and Luke (ch 3) emphasise the significance through their genealogies and other references in the birth narratives to David and Bethlehem. Through this connection with David, Jesus fulfilled many OT prophecies and was himself firmly grounded in Israel's salvation history.

Content

Attempts to turn the starkness of Jesus' reference to *dogs* into something less offensive always fail - because it is offensive and reflects the Jewish perspective noted above. It is hard to reconcile Jesus' apparent attitude to a needy woman with what we read elsewhere about him (and Matthew and Mark's willingness to include the exchange in their Gospels is also surprising). Unless ...

Perhaps Jesus was getting at the disciples, not at the woman, by taking their wish for him to be rid of her (v23) to its logical conclusion. At the same time was he was challenging the woman to reassert her belief in him in the face of such (unwarranted) scorn? Which she does, and is commended by Jesus in unqualified terms.

On this reading, which credits Jesus with great subtlety, the disciples continue to be taught, not about clean and unclean in the Jewish sense, but about how Gentiles are not to be treated as inferior, how their children are to be healed, and how their faith in Jesus is as commendable as any Jew's.

So this incident ends, not with continued contention between Jews and Gentiles, but with the possibility of equality (of the kind recognised by the risen Jesus in the Great Commission - see Matthew 28:18-20) and therefore reconciliation.

Questions on the Bible reading and context

1 Why might Jesus have taken his disciples to this foreign territory?

2 How did the woman know about Jesus' reputation as a healer?

3 Why did she call Jesus *Son of David*?

4 Why did Jesus not answer her? (A strict rabbi would not speak to either women or Gentiles in public, but Jesus seems elsewhere anything but strict.) On his silence see John 8:6; Mark 14:61; 15:5.

5 What are the implications of Jesus' answer to the disciples in v24?

6 Apart from the cleverness of the woman's answer to Jesus, what is it that strikes you most about her?

7 The healing takes place at a distance and the woman is her daughter's advocate throughout. What does that tell us about Jesus the healer?

Questions about ourselves

8 How does the title *Son of David* help us to understand more fully who Jesus was and how he was perceived?

9 Are there categories of people that we dismiss implicitly or explicitly, even if not offensively? What does this incident tell us about difference?

10 In what ways are we like the disciples here? In what ways different?

11 In what ways are we like the woman? In what ways different?

12 What experience do we have of God answering our prayers, either for ourselves or for others?

13 How do we feel about prayers that seem to go unanswered, especially if they are not for ourselves?

14 How important to us is it that God commends our faith? Is it important enough to have an effect on our behaviour?

Concluding Reflections

The woman's virtues - First is her humility as she lowers herself to the place of a dog. Second, her deep faith that a small amount of His food, like the small pieces of bread that fall from the table, is enough. This faith is praised by Christ and is the foundation of all other virtues. Third is her wisdom in that she was willing to act the part of a dog until she achieved her goal.

*Ibn al Tayyib al-Mashriqi (11th Cent.) quoted in
Jesus through Middle Eastern Eyes - Kenneth Bailey*

Jesus, Son of David - Jesus probably did not directly deny other people's application of the title *Son of David* to himself, but he did vigorously reject the idea of a political kingship connected with that title. [More likely] he accepted the concept of kingship with a new content for him - in terms of a 'kingdom not of this world', as the Gospel of John describes it.

Oscar Cullmann (abbreviated)

Lent Lecture - Tuesday 10 March

Living Reconciliation - Angharad Parry Jones. One of the issues for the past few years within the worldwide Anglican Communion has been the difficulty of finding a way to differ on major contentious issues without splitting the church. *Living Reconciliation* is the title of a book published last year about the Continuing Indaba process within the Anglican Communion initiated by the Archbishop of Canterbury, and its broader implications for churches and individual Christians: what is an active life of reconciliation? Angharad helped facilitate the process within the Anglican Communion Office and co-authored the book. She is currently training for the priesthood in the Church in Wales at St Michael's College Llandaff.

Tea and coffee will be available in St James' Church Centre from 7.45 and the Lecture will start in the hall at 8.

Other Lent Activities

Monday morning 9-10 in Church - Lent prayer (silent prayer - come and go as you please).

Monday afternoon 2-3 (SJCC) - an opportunity to explore the weekly theme in more depth.