

Crumbs

Jesus said, “It is not right to take the children’s bread and toss it to the dogs.”

And the unnamed Canaanite woman replied, “Yes it is, Lord - Even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master’s table.”

It’s quite a disturbing exchange, isn’t it? The woman comes to Jesus to ask for his help for daughter, and Jesus seems to dismiss her and call her daughter a dog in the process.

It is not right to take the children’s bread and toss it to the dogs.

This year, the lectionary is taking us through the gospel of Matthew, and over the last couple of weeks in church we’ve looked at sections from Matthew 14 – the feeding of the five thousand (14:13-21) and Jesus and Peter walking on water (14:22-33). If we read ahead from today’s reading, into the next event recorded (15:29-39) we find it is the feeding of the four thousand – where Jesus miraculously again miraculously feeds a crowd – this time four thousand men, plus women and children, from only seven loaves and a few small fish. After that miracle, the disciples collected seven baskets of leftovers (15:37).

Isn’t it remarkable that the story of the Canaanite woman’s encounter with Jesus and the disciples is bracketed by two stories of miraculous feeding with vast quantities of leftovers?

Even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master’s table.

Jesus was in the region of Tyre and Sidon – which was a Canaanite area - and verse 22 tells us that “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.””

We know from the gospel accounts, that people often sought Jesus’ healing – but this is a bit different, because this woman was a Canaanite – she wasn’t Jewish – but she approached Jesus anyway. A non-Jewish woman approaching a Jewish man went beyond the social conventions of the time.

The woman called Jesus “Lord”, and “Son of David” and asked him for mercy – to heal her daughter of her suffering.

The appropriate, polite, title for Jesus was “Teacher” (Matt 8:19, Matt 12:38, Matt 19:16 etc), but this woman uses more profound titles – this matches what Peter declares in the next chapter, when he says to Jesus “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.”. (Matt 16:16)

In his ministry, people had been challenging Jesus to prove he was the Messiah with a sign. But here, in Canaanite territory, the woman recognises him as the Son of David – the Messiah. We don’t know why or how she recognised him, when his own people

didn't, but I think back to how Jesus responded to John the Baptist's disciples when they asked him, "Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else?" (11:3), and Jesus replied, "Go back and report to John what you hear and see: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is proclaimed to the poor." (11:4-5) The evidence was there... but people chose to either ignore it, or want more.

But having recognised Jesus, the woman pleaded to him, "...have mercy on me! My daughter is demon-possessed and suffering terribly"

Strangely, Jesus offered no response. So the disciples came to Jesus and wanted him to send her away.

"Send her away." A generous interpretation of that may have been that they wanted Jesus to "Cure her daughter and send her away", but I suspect that in saying "send her way" they simply meant "send her away."

It is only then that Jesus speaks, and he says, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel." (15:24)

Who do you think he was responding to? The woman? The disciples?

Either way, the Canaanite woman doesn't give up: verse 25 The woman came and knelt before him. "Lord, help me!" she said.

It was a plea from a desperate woman, but still the response is not what the woman wanted – or what we might expect.

Jesus said, "It is not right to take the children's bread and toss it to the dogs." (15:26)

It seems, Jesus was saying, "I have been sent to Israel. It's not fair to take what is rightfully Israel's and give it to you". Which is acknowledging her request, and acknowledging his power to fulfil that request, but saying that fulfilling her request 'wouldn't be fair'.

The Greek word that is translated as 'dog' here is at the 'family pet' end of the scale. The implication we should take from it is something like taking food from a child's plate and giving it to the loyal Labrador under the table. Jesus' reference to throwing food to the dogs may not be as bad as it first sounds, but clearly, we don't take food from our children to give to our pets – they may be regarded as members of the family, but they're not – hopefully – as important as our children.

But the woman says it is right: "Yes it is, Lord. Even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table."

In most households in Australia, there's plenty of food, and if the odd crumb or crust falls on the table is accidentally brushed off the table, we're not going to eat it. We've

got plenty, we don't bother about collecting up every little bit, and if it's been on the floor, well we're not going to eat it or let our children eat it, are we? (5 second rule notwithstanding.)

We have enough regardless. We don't want it. Effectively we've rejected it for ourselves: It can't be unfair to let our dog or cat eat it, can it?

When you think about it, if there's something we don't want or we don't want any more of, how can it be unfair to let someone else have it? The prevalence of garage sales and op-shops and Lifeline book fairs is an indication that an awful lot of people are happy to give away what they don't need or want to people who make use of it.

Although the image that it brings to mind might not sit well with us, it is right to let the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table.

That is how it is with the mercy of Jesus. "I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel," Jesus says – but who is he saying it to, really, do you think? The woman? Or the disciples?

And if the people of Israel let the crumbs of Jesus' grace fall from their symbolic table, who are they to complain when someone else scoops up those crumbs and claims them for themselves?

When Jesus fed the five thousand, everyone was satisfied and yet the disciples collected twelve baskets of leftovers. That's an awful lot of crumbs.

Israel doesn't miss out because of the Canaanite woman's claim; her claim is on the mercy of Jesus – mercy which can satisfy the lost sheep of Israel and still have an abundance left over.

The very next section of Matthew's gospel (15:29-39) tells of Jesus return to Israel, and him miraculously feeding the crowd of four thousand plus women and children with seven loaves and a few small fish.

And those four thousand plus women and children didn't lose Jesus' mercy because he gave it to the Canaanite woman. In fact, there were seven baskets of leftovers were collected.

Jesus was sent first to the nation of Israel, but his mercy – his grace – is for all.

Unlike the disciples, the Canaanite woman clearly 'gets it' – she understands!

And Jesus answered her, "Woman, you have great faith! Your request is granted." and her daughter was healed at that moment. (15:28)

The Canaanite woman knew. Jesus knew. So we might wonder why Matthew records this awkward and the uncomfortable interaction? Why didn't the woman's faith lead instantly to Jesus doing as the woman wished?

It's because the lesson of this story wasn't meant for the 'dogs under the table' – the woman and her daughter – the lesson is for the children at the table – those who were proudly 'God's chosen people' – represented by the disciples.

The disciples, who were Jewish, had yet to come to terms with the fact that that the salvation that Jesus was bringing wasn't exclusively for the nation of Israel.

And while salvation is available for all because of the death and resurrection of Jesus, and gentiles are indeed 'allowed in' to the kingdom of God, it is helpful to remember that salvation through Jesus has come to us through the nation of Israel. Indeed, the woman gives Jesus the title Son of David.

Going back to the book of Genesis, God made a series of promises to Abraham, that he would become a great nation and also that all nations would be blessed through him.

Paul confirms that in his letter to the Romans (1:16) "...I am not ashamed of the gospel," he writes, "because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes: first to the Jew, then to the Gentile."

And it was this encounter with the Canaanite woman that began to open the minds of the disciples to this idea.

The Canaanite woman reached out to Jesus not because he was a good teacher, not because he was a good example, but because he was the Son of David – the Messiah – the one who she believed could – and would – save her.

She'd turned away from her beliefs as a Canaanite, and turned to Jesus. She, quite literally, put her trust in Jesus. And her trust isn't simply a vague 'oh, Jesus will make things work out'... but a very powerful statement: She knows the promises of Jesus, and she faithfully – and powerfully – claims those promises.

In the face of ancient traditions, rivalries and hatreds – rivalries and hatreds we can still understand and still see today – she turned away from the accepted ways of her society and turned to Jesus, putting her trust, her hope, her faith in him.

And just like the Canaanite woman, people today are called to put their trust not in their traditions, nor in their culture, but in Jesus.

Where do we stand today? Are we like the woman, bravely, faithfully claiming Jesus as our hope? Or are we a bit more like the disciples – knowing Jesus a bit, and sort-of-following him in terms of him being a good teacher and so on, but being a bit annoyed by people like the Canaanite woman? People who might not be 'like us' and who might distract us from our 'comfortable' faith?

The woman was certainly no less a follower of Jesus than they were, but the disciples wanted Jesus to send her on her way. She was a distraction. She was different to them in many ways – she certainly would not have fitted in with them, after all.

The Uniting Church brought together a variety of traditions, Methodist, Presbyterian and Congregational and in the nearly fifty years since union, people of many other Christian traditions (or no tradition at all) have joined our denomination.

From all those things, though, what brings us together is faith in Jesus but we can so easily be distracted from that by all kinds of things.

And if we start to find someone's zealously for Jesus a bit of an embarrassment, and start thinking it would be good if he or she was politely, but firmly, sent on their way, then we can become a bit like the disciples.

We need to remember that the offer of salvation through the death and resurrection of Jesus is for all. The crumbs fall from God's table for us all. That people aren't excluded from that offer because of their race, their socio-economic status, their politics, or their faith traditions.

That's not to say that anything goes, because salvation comes through Jesus and only through Jesus. Salvation is dependent on putting our faith and trust in him.

The Canaanite woman, called on Jesus' mercy, the mercy of Jesus as Messiah – the Son of David. She crossed a cultural divide to turn from the faith of her ancestors to turn to Jesus.

Jesus went into Canaanite territory. We traditionally focus on bringing people into church, but our emphasis should be on the church going out to people.

Jesus words in the book of Acts are clear:

“...you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” (Acts 1:8)

People have travelled to the ends of the earth to be Jesus' witnesses, but the reality is that we don't have to travel very far to meet people haven't heard about. People who haven't accepted the plentiful but valuable crumbs from God's table.

So let us live out our great faith: let us not be held back by cultural or political or geographical or technological or traditional divides – and let each one of us eat and share the crumbs of faith in Jesus.

Amen