

Non PC JC

Readings: Isaiah 56:1-8; Romans 11:11-24; Matthew 15:21-28

Our passage this morning is quite shocking to the modern mind, and it is not because there is talk of demon possession and a miraculous healing. If we have been reading Matthew from the beginning we will have been used to this by now. After all last week Jesus was walking on the water. I suspect that many of us may not have even noticed the miracle.

Rather it is Jesus' behaviour that is so arresting. Jesus seems to act and speak in a most undiplomatic way, certainly not a politically correct way. Here we see a non PC JC. Our shock at hearing Jesus behaving and speaking this way may however stop us from seeing what is going on in the passage.

SETTING THE SCENE.

Jesus has been having a running argument with the leaders from Jerusalem and it seems that he has left Jewish territory to get away from this pressure. Mark tells us that Jesus tried to keep his journey secret but things didn't work out like that.

A woman of the area, whose daughter is demon possessed comes to him for help. She calls out to Jesus, "Lord, Son of David, have mercy on me!"

Jesus somewhat uncharacteristically does not answer. Yet she keeps calling. His disciples urge him to send her away, presumably by doing what she asks. Jesus says to his disciples that he was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel. He has his hands full, he will not be distracted from what he has to do.

Yet she comes and kneels before him, the same word that is used elsewhere for worship and pleads for help. From what we know of Jesus we know what should happen next, a compassionate glance, a merciful miracle and an encouragement to a life of faith.

Well if it has been surprising enough that he has so far ignored her requests for help what he says is far more surprising. Even shocking.

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

ARGUING THE TOSS

Dogs

It is very hard to see this statement in an unshocking fashion. We might think that this was somehow less shocking in those times but dogs in the New Testament are linked with pigs (Matt 7:6, 2Pet 2:22) and with evil and that which is to be avoided (Philippians 3:2, Revelation 22:15) which only makes things worse. Some scholars have suggested that we need to imagine that Jesus said these words with a smile on his face and compassion in his eyes which took the sting out of them. (Barclay)

Others not so prone to speculation have noted that Jesus is clearly thinking of household dogs and does use the diminutive form of the word, that is little dogs, or even puppies. But it is still less than complimentary.



"My job might be boring, but it puts food under the table."

Priority

Perhaps it is best not to focus on the word 'dogs' at all but on the whole sentence, that which Jesus trying to convey. His priority is to the Israel, what he has called the lost sheep of Israel. (I have to say that if given the choice of being a sheep or a dog I know which I would choose.)

What he has got, what he has come to give is for Israel. He is the Son of David, he is Israel's Messiah. His mission is to them.

Her reply shows that she understands this. "Yes, Lord," she said, "but even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table." (Matthew 15:27, NIV).

Her answer shows that she agrees with Jesus, she accepts his position but she argues the toss, to feed the children does not mean that the dogs of the house go hungry. She knows that he is Israel's Messiah, she has no claim on him but she is willing to settle for whatever crumbs that she can get. She skilfully uses Jesus own statement to support her own cry for help.

You cannot help but admire her. Certainly Jesus is impressed. She says that her faith is great. In the preceding passage Peter has been described as "You of little faith." Here we meet an anonymous pagan woman who is the surprising face of great faith. As she has come to faith in Israel's Messiah Jesus grants her request with immediate results. He may have his mission to Israel but ultimately he is Saviour for all the nations and his message is to go to all nations.

THE SURPRISING FACE OF GREAT FAITH.

This may help us to understand what is going on in the passage but what does it mean for us.

Made clean by Faith

To understand this I believe we need to look at the first part of our reading. Jesus is arguing with the Pharisees and Scribes about what makes a person "clean", acceptable to God. Jesus says that it is not externals which make a person clean, what goes into the mouth, but what comes out.

Immediately after this we meet our woman, who in the eyes of most Jews, especially the Jewish leaders was as unclean as they could come. She was a woman. If that wasn't bad enough she is described as a Canaanite, part of the cultural enemies of the people of God, who God had judged because of their wicked religious practices. And she has a demon possessed daughter, you can almost imagine them thinking "What else do you expect?"

Yet she shows by what she says that she is not unclean, she comes to Jesus, she depends completely on him and finds acceptance. Her faith makes her clean.

She is an illustration of what Jesus has just taught. She is thus a reminder to us that externals are not what count, but where the heart is.

I remember watching a video about cocaine use. It featured users speaking of their experiences, what they had done. They are the ones that in our society we would have assumed to be unclean. Yet all these addicts, with all their pasts had become Christians. Now despite what had gone up their noses, what came out of their mouths showed that they were clean, they were acceptable to God.

There is both a comfort and challenge here to us. However we may feel, what other may feel about us, when we approach God through Jesus we are acceptable to him, what a comfort. But it also challenges us not to be judgemental of others, to judge by externals. People can so easily be looking good while being bad as well as the reverse. Those we think have gone to the dogs may be children of the Kingdom.

The Resources of Jesus

But if we look at the wider context of this passage in Matthew we can see there is something else going on here. For this passage fits into a pattern which concerns a subject which many of you know is very close to my heart, bread.

In chapter 14 Jesus is faced with a crowd of 5000 hungry people, the disciples think this is hopeless situation, yet Jesus takes 5 loaves of bread and 2 fish and feeds them all, he can provide for his people in need.

We return to the idea of bread at the start of chapter 15 where rather than being impressed with Jesus ability to provide bread the Pharisees and Scribes are concerned that his disciples are not eating it properly; they don't wash their hands beforehand.

Straight after our passage this morning Jesus again is faced with the hungry, 4000 Gentiles this time, and the disciples wonder where they will be able to get the bread from. You can almost hear the exasperation of Jesus as he asks how many bread loaves they have and proceeds to take their 7 loaves and few fish and feed all that are there.

Then just for good measure in the next chapter the disciples go on a boat trip and they forget to take any bread, and they are worried that they are going to be in trouble because of it.

I don't think that all this talk of bread is a coincidence. It seems to me that Matthew is using this idea of bread to indicate what Jesus has to offer, the resources that Jesus has. The disciples consistently don't recognise what Jesus can do, the Pharisees are too busy with their rules and regulations to realise what Jesus has to offer and in the middle of this we have a woman who is happy to just get the crumbs. No wonder Jesus says she has great faith.

The disciples look at their surroundings and wonder where they are going to get bread, Peter looks at the wind and starts to sink, the Pharisees can't see beyond the way Jesus' disciples eat. They all focus on the problem, this woman focuses on the solution, on Jesus. The disciples get distracted from Jesus; she will not be put off and tenaciously seeks what Jesus has. The Pharisees are offended by Jesus, but she refused to be, she will stay with him to get what she can even if it is just a crumb.

By placing her story in the midst of all the other stories about bread Matthew is encouraging us to be like her and not like the Pharisees or the Disciples. We are being encouraged to not take too high a view of ourselves but to look to the resources that Jesus has available and look to him for strength knowing that even a crumb of what he offers is enough. We are encouraged to let go of our pride and trust in him, for though we are not worth so much as to gather up the crumbs under his table yet he mercifully provides and far more than a crumb, he calls us to sit with him at table

THE REAL SHOCK: PUPPIES OF THE NEW COVENANT

I wonder if that message of humble dependence is the real shock in this passage for the modern mind. Humility and dependence are not generally attributes that are prized in our self affirming, DIY world. But Jesus is not interested in being PC, he wants us to understand the truth.

I grew up in the Brethren Church just up the road and I remember one of the great saints of that Church, Mr Wulnizer speaking on this passage. He knew Greek and particularly spoke about the particular form of the word "dog", that should be translated "puppies". He spoke of how this showed the great mercy of Jesus in welcoming this woman into God's family. In that Church it was the tradition for someone to stand after a talk and pray, but no one was quite sure how as in truth the talk had been mainly about the diminutive of the Greek word for dog. Finally after a long pause a young man stood and said, "Lord, Lord, we thank you that we are puppies of the new covenant." Now there is a memorable phrase. But in many ways it captures this passage for it both puts us in our place "puppies" but also the great blessing "of the new covenant"

It might not be very PC but I hope that each of us will leave here rejoicing that we are puppies of the new covenant, resolutely trusting and looking to our master to supply all that we need for our walk of faith.