

Am I worthy?

St Leonard's Denmark, Alison Kershaw

Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost, 16th August 2026 [20] Year A

Isaiah 56.1, 6-8; Matthew 15.21-28

Through the written word and the spoken word may we know your Living Word, Jesus Christ our Saviour, Amen

At the outset of today's passage from Matthew's Gospel, Jesus enters the district of Tyre and Sidon – Gentile territory. Word has gone ahead, and his attention is sought by a distressed Canaanite woman. In Mark she is a Syrophenician, but Matthew makes her a Canaanite – even more of an outsider. The Canaanites were violently conquered by Joshua and despised by the Hebrews as being only fit to be “hewers of wood and drawers of water” - a disrespected servant class (Joshua 9:24).

Yet, what this desperate woman has heard about Jesus, or perhaps suddenly sensed in his presence, gives her the courage to seek healing for her possessed daughter, which at the time may have described anything from epilepsy to mental illness. What follows is not what we might have expected of our compassionate Jesus. She is respectful – she addresses him with the messianic title “Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David,” - yet also breaches the distance and shatters the silence she was expected to keep. The word translated as *shouting* in our version, is from the Greek *krázō* (pronounced *krad'-zo*) - an onomatopoeic term for a raven's cry. It implies such sounds as a croak, a scream, a shriek, or a loud entreaty. The same word is used in many passages describing high emotion – blind men calling for healing (Matt. 20.30), the crowds calling for Jesus to be crucified (Mk 15.13-14) and, most movingly, to describe Jesus' last cry from the cross before he “breathed his last” (Matt 27.50) The raven's cry can express terrible pain and the deep anguish of abandonment.ⁱ

Crucially, the woman's cry is not for herself, it is for her daughter – surely a plea that transcends any tribal boundary – a cry that moves us all too often as news comes in from the war and disaster zones of the world.

And yet, “he did not answer her at all.” And yet, the disciples suggest, as they so often do, that Jesus send this disturbing person away. He then explains his seeming indifference - “I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel” - as if to say – sorry you don't qualify – there's nothing much I can do.

But the woman will not give up. Kneeling now, she continues to plead for help. Jesus justifies his refusal in a most shocking way: “It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs” – salvation is for the Israelites – and not to be wasted on others. While it was an insult to call Gentiles dogs, the term used here means little dog or pet that you would expect to find under a table. Not that this softens the blow at all – it perhaps makes it even more patronising - even to the dog-lovers of the parish, it is a shocking put-down.

The woman's response turns the tables – “Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table” – The implied question is - Am I not at least worthy of a crumb from the meal intended for the Israelites? And the answer to that, the answer that is the good news for all people, is – Yes you *are* worthy, not only to catch the crumbs, but to feast at the Lord's table. The woman's daughter is healed, she is rewarded for her persistence, and commended for her faith. The most moving aspect of this story for me, is the agonised call from the heart – the raven's cry – which gives her the boldness to claim that she and her daughter are as worthy of attention and healing as anyone else.

There seem to be several approaches to interpreting this exchange. One is a straight reading in which Jesus, a Jewish man of his time, is shocked into realising the true breadth of his calling, and is challenged, moved, woken up, and changed by the alien woman – who, in effect, reminds Jesus of the important part of his own tradition described for example in Isaiah “my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples,” including “the foreigners who join themselves to the Lord.” (Is. 56.6-8)

Other readings see Jesus, in his all-seeing divinity, as drawing out and highlighting the prejudice of the disciples on the one hand – and the faith of the woman on the other. His rejection, in other words, is considered rhetorical, and sets the stage for a lesson on faith and the wideness of God's love.

But I lean toward the first – given that a few chapters earlier, Jesus gives the twelve “authority over unclean spirits and to cure every disease and every sickness” – but to “go nowhere among the Gentiles, and enter no

town of the Samaritans (also despised by the Hebrews) but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” (Matt 10.1-6). John Shleby Spong points out that the overarching and unfolding theme of Matthew’s gospel is universality. It begins with a genealogy that singles out four “rejected and ‘sinful’ Gentile women, involved in stories of incest, prostitution, seduction and adultery, including the Canaanite Rahab who aided Jacob’s destruction of Jericho. His birth is honoured by the Gentile Magi, following a star that “shines for the entire world to see.”ⁱⁱ And now, this account of the Canaanite woman is a “transitional moment” in that unfolding theme of universality – the point at which Jesus understands himself as the universal Christ – the one anointed to bring peace, reconciliation, healing, and joy to all people.

However we read it, our focus is drawn to the woman and the persuasive strength of her claim to worthiness. The story opens our ears to the raven’s cry of those who have been abandoned and excluded by the boundaries established by religious and cultural systems and by our own sheer prejudice. As Spong points out that at other times in history, this Canaanite woman is the Jew pushed into a ghetto, the Muslim fought in a ‘murderous Crusade’, the enslaved African, or the woman denied the vote, or education, or ordination, the person silenced and denied blessing for their sexual orientation, or the indigenous child stolen away from their family and culture. The terrible truth is that not all lives have counted equally in the course of history – and there are times for the overlooked, excluded, exploited, or reviled, to proudly shout out - “We count, we matter, hear us.”

And, as much as we can exclude others, we can also exclude ourselves from healing and the embrace of love. Christ calls us to find the balance between humility and assurance – to acknowledge our damaging failings in order to open our hearts, and to know that we are deserving of love and inclusion. We are children of God, and every child has the right to feel loved, safe, and cherished.

How does this story touch you? Do you hold back a raven’s cry inside?

When we are in need of healing, is not the first step to believe that our lives are sacred and worthy of saving?

And having come that far, can we also believe that we are worthy to magnify the light of Christ in the boundless, universal, and welcoming love we bear to others. Amen

ⁱ Various concordances cited on Bible Hub (<https://biblehub.com/greek/2896.htm>)

ⁱⁱ “The Canaanite Woman: Matthew’s Icon of Prejudice” by John Shleby Spong.
<http://reinventingsdawheel.blogspot.com/2014/10/part-xxx-matthew-canaanite-woman.html>
Oct 23, 2014.