

## WELCOMING “THE OTHER”

**Nic Denny-Dimitriou - 14th August 2005**

### **Matthew 15: 21-28**

There are many gospel stories where, following the event or the telling of a parable in a crowd, Jesus helps his disciples understand the parable or explains more clearly how God is at work in the situation. The event in today's gospel reading is not one of them – it is recorded no explanation on Jesus' part. In preparing today's sermon, I was intrigued with the question, “What if Jesus (or one of the disciples) had kept a journal at the time?” It might then have been easier to understand Jesus' interaction recorded by Matthew in this passage, and therefore to learn more of how God is at work.

For the author of Matthew's gospel, the setting for today's story is off the beaten track, in predominantly Gentile areas. From his encounter with the Canaanite woman, but it is apparent that Jesus understood his mission as directed to the people of Israel. The fact that this gospel was written to a predominantly Jewish audience some time after Jesus' death and resurrection reflects how the church understood it was being challenged to share the gospel with non-Jews.

By any interpretation, the exchange between Jesus and the Gentile woman, debating the focus of Jesus' mission, can only be described as “feisty”. The mission he had embraced until now had been defined by ethnic boundaries – the “lost sheep of Israel” first. When Jesus refers to the Jewish people as children and to Gentiles as dogs, he is using a common expression of the time – but even if we try to tone it down, it is not a polite expression. You could be forgiven for wondering if Jesus was having a bad day, given the way he initially responded to her.

But this woman is not going to be put off! Her daughter is in real difficulty, and she throws out a challenge to Jesus. She challenges his reluctance to work a miracle for a Gentile, using the principle of mercy. She tells him that even a dog eats crumbs that have fallen off the family food table. She is not about to allow the provision of God's mercy to be defined by ethnic bias.

The Canaanite woman is portrayed in the gospel as the ‘other’, the outsider, the stranger, the ‘dog’! We know nothing more about her, she is nameless in the story, and we can only assume that being a Canaanite, she is part of an ethnic group not only opposed to the Jews but with religious practices considered detestable. They were certainly not worshippers of God – but of many gods. But we can only make assumptions. Yet she must have seen or heard enough about Jesus to see something of God in him – for she calls him “Lord, the Son of David”.

She has a profound impact on the direction of Jesus' ministry, and he declares her to be a person of great faith who changes Jesus' mission direction (initially going only to the “lost sheep of Israel”).

**Openness to the other:**

The voice of the nameless, the outsider, the refugee and the 'other' is one we need to attend to.

One person suggests that we meet the possibilities we have never dared to dream of when we allow God to speak to us through strangers. Just as Jesus' encounter with the Canaanite woman caused his understanding of mission to become enlarged, in the understanding of 'unbiased grace'.

When we offer hospitality, we embrace the 'other'. In the New Testament, the Greek word for hospitality is *philoxenos*, meaning 'love of the stranger', so the depth of our awareness of that love is our invitation to show hospitality to the stranger. Offering hospitality creates a safe and welcoming space for the other to find their own sense of humanity and worth. This offer of hospitality, with eyes open to the Spirit, welcomes strangers with a delight in the possibility that God might be present.

Offering hospitality to the stranger means much more than merely tolerating diversity. Rather, it implies learning from the 'other', the stranger and learning something more of ourselves. Our faith has the opportunity to grow when we are confronted with different ideas, different experiences, different views and new ways of seeing God at work. Our prejudices can be exposed and converted into new understanding, new experiences of God's grace.

Are we preoccupied with our own particular view of the world? Might our understanding of what God is asking of us need to be challenged; do our boundaries need stretching? Are there areas where we need to widen our focus to allow God's 'unbiased grace' to break through?

**Jesus for all; God's mercy is for all:**

Jesus' earthly ministry in Palestine was aimed primarily at Jewish people. Generations were prepared for the full revelation of God's divine plan through the Messiah – and the Jews were to be "a light to the Gentiles".

Yet even at end of his ministry, he commissioned his disciples to take the Good News of God's Kingdom to all. Spread from Jerusalem, to Judea, to Samaria, to the ends of the earth!

God's grace respects no boundaries made by people.

JHB: What do you do? (i.e. what is your income / car / suburb)

CT: Where do you live? (which side of the railway line?

How close to sea, mountain?)

KZN: What school did you go to?

Positive: Human tendency - inquisitive, take interest in people; good natured rivalry  
Negative: Categorize, put people in boxes, even stigmatise on that basis; to say, "He's not one of us!"

God's grace knows or respects no boundaries made by people.

- Race
- Class and income
- Culture
- Gender
- Age
- Physical appearance
- Education

Church – people of God, the community of believers who seek to pattern their life in the way of Christ – need to reflect this.