

Speaking in crumbs

Pitt Street Uniting Church, Sunday 20 August 2023

A Reflection by Rev Dr Josephine Inkpin

Pentecost 12A

Genesis 45:1-15; Matthew 15: 21-28

This worship service can be viewed on You Tube at <https://pittstreetuniting.org.au/spirit/reflections/>

How do you feel about being called a dog - and/or not quite human, or sub-human, unnatural, intrinsically disordered, not biological, unclean, heathen, pagan, infidel, heretic, wild, rabid, crazy, illegal, alien, or one of the long, long, list of ethnic ¹, gendered, and other slurs some continue to endure today? So many people know this only too well. If you have more than one type of marginalised human identity then you may face this even more intensely. Today's Gospel story puts such 'dogs' firmly in the centre of life and faith, in the figure of the one named as a Canaanite woman. Note well: this is someone not even given a name. For denying people's true names and authentic identities is a game as old as time, and it is well and truly alive today. Every day, there are people treated like dogs who, at best, can only aspire to the crumbs which fall from the tables of the privileged. This story therefore is still our story as a human race, and the light it brings comes from speaking in crumbs...

For Christians, today's Gospel story has always been challenging and deeply problematic. It is not simply that we are brought face to face with the searing powers of immense ancient, visceral, exclusion. The parallel story in Mark's Gospel speaks of the woman as Syro-Phoenician but Matthew uses the much older word Canaanite. In doing so, Matthew intends us to think of the long and troubled history of the land and its peoples: of conquest and massacre, pain and struggle, violence and misery, fear and shame, cultural devastation and marginalisation. Matthew's Gospel is particularly clear about that. Think, and, still more, feel even the surface of the horrendous depth of violence, misery, and rejection that First Nations peoples carry today. That is one extraordinary box of challenges to take the lid off. Even more troubling however is that Jesus appears, at first sight, not so much to offer a way forward but rather a confirmation of the hideous depths of exclusion.

Is Jesus thereby a racist in this story, not to mention a misogynist and inhumane in other ways? If so, what does that then mean to Christian Faith? And if Jesus is not a racist, then what on earth do we make of their words and behaviour? There are a number of different responses offered by Christian tradition and by theologians today. I will touch on some of these in a moment. They are important and, to varying degrees, helpful. Above all however, I would suggest we keep holding the Canaanite woman at the centre, just as the artist Michael Cook has done in his painting *Crumbs of Love* (included in our liturgy sheet today). ² Or, to put it another way, to understand the bread of life that is present here, we have to see the crumbs, and hear them speaking.

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_ethnic_slurs

² See further for Michael Cook's work <http://www.hallowed-art.co.uk/twelve-mysteries-2/>

Three particular elements of the story speak powerfully of how God is present in and through the crumbs of life. The first element is the context: in terms of time, geography and spiritual symbolism. As Matthew's Gospel tells it, this incident occurs shortly after Jesus has been in vigorous conflict with Pharisees and scribes over the nature of Judaeen religious tradition. A few verses earlier, Jesus thus contrasts what is named as *'the tradition of the (religious) elders'* with *'the commandment of God'*, whose love and true word is nullified by narrow adherence to tradition. Significantly, for today's story, Jesus refers to the words of Isaiah:

'This people honours me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching human precepts as doctrines.'

Jesus speaks instead of what is truly defiling; namely those evils which come out of the heart, not external features. Jesus then leaves the self-regarding guardians of Judaeen tradition to enter the district of Tyre and Sidon: that is, out of Judaea into Gentile territory, out of the assumed good into the bad lands, out of the centre into the borderlands. In contrast to the righteous Pharisees and scribes, stands the Canaanite, the ancient 'other', and in the form of a woman.

Today's Gospel story thus seems to have its original setting in the conflict within Judaeen religious circles about the heart of faith, which Matthew has linked in turn to the early Christian conflict about the place of the Gentiles. This however still does not answer the question of Jesus' seeming racism, misogyny and inhumanity. Matthew of course began his Gospel by deliberately reminding his audience that Jesus' genealogy included the Canaanite women Tamar and Rahab, both dubious women on other scores as well as race. If Jesus had Canaanite genes – and the implication is that Mary too may have directly provided such a bloodline – why does Jesus then speak so brutally to the Canaanite woman desperately seeking help?

Some interpreters, seeking to protect Jesus' divinity, have suggested that Jesus was testing the woman to bring forth a depth of true penitence, offering us a model of humility and petitioning of God. Yet such a pietistic understanding still leaves Jesus, and God in Jesus, appearing very harsh. In contrast, more recent interpreters, keen to stress Jesus' humanity, have suggested that the story indicates how Jesus was like us in bearing the prejudices of their time and upbringing.

The Canaanite woman thus taught Jesus a lesson and helped Jesus grow in understanding, just as we grow out of our own human mistakes and pre-judgments. This is perhaps more helpful for some today. Yet such a humanistic interpretation has its own limitations. For even if some of us may be happy to rework ancient understandings of the nature of divinity, and what perfect humanity means, we are still left with questions of the value of such a damaged model of humanity, particularly as a bearer of divine love.

It is crucial, therefore, to note a second element of today's Gospel story: namely its power dynamics. For even if we consider that Jesus was not typical of a Judaeen religious leader in all respects - including being of possible 'mixed blood' as well as subversive in so much of their teaching and actions – for the Canaanite woman Jesus still bore powerful privileges of race, gender, education and socio-economic status which were not hers. Whilst there were many nuances within it, and they now shared Roman imperial oppression, Judaeen tradition had also been her people's historic oppressor. Just to come to a Judaeen religious figure for help would therefore have been a very hard thing.

When Jesus first does not answer, and then speaks of being '*sent only to the lost sheep of Israel*', how would the woman have felt? To be forced to fall on her knees before Jesus might then be interpreted more piously by some, but, for me, it smacks of the very depths of humiliation. If this is bringing the woman to faith, it is arguably utterly shocking. Perhaps we need to look at this another way.

In one of our recent A Voice in the Wilderness study sessions, the point was strongly made that there is a profound difference between types of helping and also between 'power over' and the 'power of self-determination'. Conceivably, this is part of what is at stake in our Gospel story. If Jesus had simply 'helped' the woman, that would have left the power dynamics intact between them, and between their racial groups. Jesus might have been seen as very generous: so much a model of compassion that they would 'even' help a Canaanite woman.

Yet she would have remained an outcast to polite society and religion and, for herself and others, only an object of charity. Instead, Jesus first names the racist ways of operating which bound the woman, her vulnerable daughter, and her people, and then creates a way in which the woman can stand up for herself, and can, as it were, claim her own sovereignty and self-determination. Did Jesus wink to the woman to alert her to this? Some would like to think so, but we cannot know.

What we do know is the power of the woman's ultimate response: 'yes' she says, let us not pretend - some of you, by race and history, not only have almost all the bread, but can feast, '*yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table.*' Her voice, and that of her oppressed people, is heard; the truth about power and their shared history is told; and thereby a step towards genuine reconciliation and new life together, is made.

For a third key element is the woman's own strength and agency. Of course, this is borne of sheer motherly desperation. In her poem of that name, Jan Richardson called this the woman's '*Stubborn Blessing*'. For when they recognised faith in her, was Jesus really praising humility and penitence, or was it actually the woman's stubbornness? As Jan Richardson comments, maybe the real truth is that, for those treated as dogs:

the story shows us that when it comes to saving what needs saving, being merely nice and pliant won't win the day, or the life. Sometimes we need to dig in our heels and do some hollering. ³

As I said earlier, we may therefore do well not to obsess so much about Jesus in this story, as to centre on the Canaanite woman. Out of her need, she finds strength to speak up, and in this is faith: neither resignation, nor mere begging, but the stubborn blessing of self-determination, claiming her own sovereignty. That too makes more sense of the context and the power at play. For as scholars of the ancient world have pointed out, we cannot make real sense of this story without seeing it in terms of honour and shame; determining forces which were so much more influential than in our contemporary Western world.

What we see in today's Gospel story mirrors other types of stories in ancient literature where someone approaches a leader with a request, which is initially dismissed, but later conceded. In the exchange, the leader is shown to be just and fair, and the subject is also judged virtuous. Both receive public honour, a win-win situation which was uncommon in the zero-sum game of honour/shame that structured the ancient world. ⁴

³ <https://paintedprayerbook.com/2014/08/11/stubborn-blessing/>

⁴ <https://zondervanacademic.com/blog/the-canaanite-w>

There are parallels too in our other story we heard today, of Joseph's reconciliation with his family. For this only fully happens, with restorative justice, when the truth of violence and oppression is named; when the voice and agency of the original victim is expressed; and when the shame afflicting all is acknowledged and honour restored to all.

To conclude, today's story throws up many questions for us, including:

- what barriers do we see in our society?;
- what kind of people challenge us uncomfortably?;
- what does helping and self-determination mean to us?; and, vitally,
- who is speaking in crumbs to us?

For, significantly, this passage follows the feeding of the five thousand in the previous chapter. That feast is possible because of the offerings of a child, another figure of weakness who is bearer of new life. That is the nature of the true life-giving Gospel, in which those regarded as weak feed others, and the stumbling block becomes the corner stone.

This is symbolised in the Eucharist, or Holy Communion: where, as in today's story, honour is restored out of shame, and all receive crumbs of love that we might become crumbs of love, and share crumbs of love with others. In this we recognise the hurts and -isms of our own lives and world, and our own exclusionary ways.

For in truth-telling there is hope, and transformation. Amen.