

09 September 2018 Trinity 15 St Martins

Today we heard a particularly challenging bit of scripture. It appears on the surface that Jesus insults a mother by calling her a dog. A woman from the area of Tyre, (modern-day Lebanon) comes to Him asking for help and He basically calls her a dog—or at least Jesus compares her to a dog. In Jesus' time, it was common for Jews to call Gentiles dogs, but it was a highly offensive label. I'm not sure whether it's a cultural thing but when I was in Afghanistan, we always had a dog with us on patrol because the Afghans HATED dogs. The dog was either with us to sniff out explosives and potential IED's or as an aggressive, 'keep your distance please' type hound. Even today in our society it is an insult to call someone a bitch.

Surely Jesus said this in a tone that made it clear he wasn't serious and he was only trying to test her or make a point to his other followers. This woman must have seen the twinkle in his eye and that's why she was able to respond the way she did.

Other scholars will have you believe that we aren't translating this word quite right - Jesus really called her a little dog, more of a puppy really. And we all know how cute puppies can be! It would be much better if Jesus softened the blow of his statement by calling her something as cute and adorable as a three-month-old golden retriever. But everywhere else in the bible and in the culture of the time, being referred to as a dog was a great insult. They were a symbol of dishonour and they were used to mean great offence.

So we are left with the uncomfortable situation of Jesus insulting this woman to her face. We are left with Jesus saying what all the rest of the people in that room were thinking. We are left with the Son of God expressing our doubts and prejudices on our behalf. We are uncomfortable and even shaken and disturbed when Jesus said this, and we should be. We should be offended when Jesus responded to her need by saying the children must be fed before the dogs.

For the Jews there is a right and proper order to things. There is the way things are supposed to be done; there are rituals that must be followed as a means of being clean and holy. Jesus just had a long discussion about what

foods people can and cannot eat. He just explained that the religious leaders' understanding of what is holy was all messed up. These people have drawn lines in the sand to keep others out. They have missed the point of why the laws were there to begin with. The rules are there to keep us in line and to guide us, not to exclude others.

We have the same issues today. We have deemed some things worthy of our help and attention and other things not worthy. We make these decisions every day, consciously and unconsciously. We decide what is worthy of our time, our gifts, our money, and our attention. We decide what we want to get involved in, who we want to help. There are so many people in need, so many different ways that we can get involved, and we have to make these choices, we can't do it all. But it is the way that we choose that we need to pay attention to.

We are confronted with need on a regular basis, through commercials asking for our involvement, through opportunities to minister and help at church, through encounters with individuals in our daily life. How often do our 'unwritten rules' get in the way of what God is asking us to do. "But we've always done it this way" in our discipleship and church life is almost as common as "We've tried that before and it didn't work last time..."

The woman was a Greek, born in Syrian Phoenicia. She begged Jesus to drive the demon out of her daughter. 'First let the children eat all they want,' he told her, 'for it is not right to take the children's bread and toss it to their dogs.' 'Yes, Lord,' she replied, 'but even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs.' Then he told her, 'For such a reply, you may go; the demon has left your daughter.' She went home and found her child lying on the bed, and the demon gone."

This was a woman with a quick mind and a quick wit. She responded to Jesus' statement with a sharp reply. I admire this woman for how quickly she took the statement of Jesus and turned it round. She was persistent and was not to be put off and Jesus recognised her faith and her child was healed.

It's like the student who was working at a supermarket store. He was in the produce section and a little old lady came up to him and said, "Can I buy

just half a head of lettuce?” He said, “Ma’am I don’t know, but I’ll go ask the manager.” So the guy went up one aisle and down the other and found the manager at the back corner of the store. He walked up and said, “Sir, there’s an idiot over there who wants to buy half a head of lettuce.” What he didn’t realize was that this little old lady was fast and she had followed him step for step. Just as he was talking to the manager he caught a glimpse of her in his peripheral vision and so he said, “Sir, there’s an idiot over there who wants to buy half a head of lettuce...and this dear lady wants to buy the other half!”

So they took care of the lady, and the manager picked up on what the guy had done. He said, “You’re pretty sharp. Where are you from?” He said, “I’m from Manchester that has a reputation for being a boring town but that produces fantastic football players and has two great football teams.” The manager frowned and said, “My wife is from Manchester.” Without missing a beat he said, “Really, what team did she play for?” Like that boy, this Gentile woman had a quick wit. But Jesus didn’t just admire this woman’s wit—He admired her faith.

Of greater interest is the placing of this story in the gospels. It not only records Jesus' withdrawal from the opposition of the Pharisees and teachers of the law but contrasts their approach to the Messiah with that of this woman. They belong to the covenant people but take offense at the conduct of Jesus' disciples, challenge his authority, and are so defective in understanding the Scriptures that they show themselves not to be plants the heavenly Father has planted. But this woman is a pagan, a descendent of ancient enemies, and with no claim on the God of the covenant. Yet in the end she approaches the Jewish Messiah and with great faith asks only for grace; and her request is granted.