

*a cry from the heart*  
a sermon preached on the  
*eleventh sunday after pentecost*  
20 August 2017  
at  
*st john's*  
ANGLICAN CHURCH CAMBERWELL  
*by dr wendy crouch*

the lections: Isaiah 56:1,6-8; Ps 67; Romans: 11:13-32; Matthew 15:10-28

Are you troubled – offended even – by the gospel reading today? It is at the very least a challenging one, if not troubling, I have always found. And perhaps, like me, you have avoided what it says of Jesus, and the picture it presents of him. This is not the gentle Jesus meek and mild that a lot of us were taught about, and sang about, as children. Firstly, the disciples are concerned that Jesus has offended the Pharisees by calling them hypocrites and speaking about their unclean hearts resulting in all sorts of vile things coming out of their mouths. The Pharisees have kept accusing Jesus of wrong doing and have been trying to trap him in seemingly clever yet trivial arguments. He responds by sounding a little here like parents in an earlier generation who would say to their children: “I’ll wash your mouth out with soap if you speak like that again”. Of course, the Pharisees did not just need their mouths washed out but, as Jesus points out, their hearts attended to; a requirement for all of us as we struggle to live as God wants us to – in justice, mercy, and faith, at the very core of ourselves – this is the true spirit of the Old Testament Torah, as Jesus says later in Matthew<sup>1</sup>.

Following this somewhat acrimonious encounter, Jesus then moves away from that Jewish location near Jerusalem to the area of Tyre and Sidon which is Gentile territory. He crosses a significant geographical boundary at this point.

And there he meets the Canaanite woman and we hear some more troubling responses by Jesus. Let us picture this in our imaginations. Perhaps we could place it in something like Federation Square. All sorts of people milling around, some children playing over there, others grabbing a bite to eat. Some just sitting on a step waiting for someone. And through the crowd comes a disturbance, a woman shouting rather crazy things, or so it seems. What happens when we experience this, in the street, or on public transport? People are embarrassed, look away- perhaps afraid that things will get out of hand. Jesus ignores her as well initially. And yet, this non-Jewish woman seems to be recognising something of who Jesus is as she shouts *Lord, Son of David, have mercy on me* over and over.

She keeps on shouting until the disciples are so annoyed and distressed they ask Jesus to get rid of her quickly. There is a rather cold response from Jesus about being sent only to the House of Israel, implying not to the Gentiles. This indeed has been his priority up to this point.

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew 23:23

Can you imagine the desperation of this woman that she has been driven to this state? So focused is she on her tormented daughter's need that she will face any embarrassment to get help for her. We do not know the details of the daughter's illness, but whether it be evil spirits/demons, or some severe mental health illness, this mother has been struggling to deal with it, perhaps singlehandedly, for many years. She is in torment herself after the daily pressure and demands of a gravely ill daughter. Day after day, facing chaos at home, violent behavior, objects thrown and smashed. Hopes of relief have been dashed over and over. But she loves this child who has come from her womb, and she will not give up. And she has heard enough of Jesus to form a faith and conviction that he is the one who will be able to help.

And so she will not accept dismissal and rejection, but persists in her faith. We see one of the most moving images in all the gospels when this woman, already rebuffed by Jesus twice, tries again. From her deep conviction that Jesus is the only one who can reach into the chaos of her family's life and bring healing to her beloved daughter she kneels before Jesus in deep respect, and begs him in a clear cry from the heart: "Lord, help me". This is all the heart can manage when it is overwhelmed; this is prayer, pure and simple. Do you sometimes do that? The short heartfelt prayer to Jesus who stands before you. What else can be said? The heart is too full and the desire too great to heap up words. I can barely even get those words out. Lord help me! I can do no other.

In the resulting dialogue where Jesus says, "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs", this amazing woman uses her astuteness and wit to turn this initially testy interchange to her advantage. "Yes Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their Master's table". And Jesus then immediately responds in recognition of her deep faith: "Woman, great is your faith, let it be done for you as you wish".

And there is a cataclysmic result; not only is the woman's daughter healed, but there is an immense upheaval in Jesus' understanding and practice of his mission from that point. He realizes he is now the Messiah for *all* – Jew and non-Jew; the geographical and religious walls have come crashing down. There is no longer "you're in" and "you're out", but God's love is extended to *all*.

So perhaps we can understand why this woman has been described by the New Testament scholar Brendan Byrne as "one of the great heroes of the Bible tradition"<sup>2</sup>, or in our modern terminology we would call her a 'super hero'. This woman of outstanding faith has pulled Jesus away from his intense focus on the Jews, the house of Israel, to be the Messiah in whose name the Gentiles will hope also (Matthew 12.21). And that includes us! We are indeed inheritors of this hero woman's outstanding faith.

What a contrast between the hearts of the Pharisees and the heart of this woman! And we all have aspects of both hearts within us if we are truly honest with ourselves.

Which heart are we offering to Christ now as he stands before us here – in this place, offering us his love? The one that, as Jesus says, "honours me only with lip service while your heart are far from me".<sup>3</sup> Or the heart that knows its needs, its poverty of spirit, and focuses utterly

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<sup>2</sup> B. Byrne, *Lifting the burden: Reading Matthew's gospel in the church today*, (Strathfield, Whitaker House, 2016) 123

<sup>3</sup> Matthew 15:8-9

on that which is most needed. Let us follow this woman in purity of heart and fall down before Christ in complete trust and reverence.

*Lord, in your mercy, help us.*