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Sermon

Even the Dogs ...

Matthew 15:21-28; Isaiah 56:1,6-8; Romans 11:1-2a, 29-32

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There is a grand theme across the readings today of the inclusion of the Gentile nations into God's plan of salvation and the Kingdom of God on earth.

The passage from Isaiah lays forth a vision of the broad spread of humanity coming into relationship with God. Foreigners will bind themselves to the Lord to serve him. They will love his name, worship him and come into covenant with him. Thus God's house will be called a house of prayer for all nations.

This is a vision which only started to be fulfilled when the gospel went out to nations beyond Israel.

Psalm 67 the set Psalm for today has a repeated references to the nations: Salvation known among the nations, all peoples praising God. Nations singing for joy and being ruled by God. God ruling and guiding the nations. It looks more like a millennial fulfilment than just the Christian era. Nonetheless, it is background for the expectation that other nations besides Israel would come into salvation.

In Romans, we heard a short extract from a lengthy discussion of the relationship between Jews and Gentiles in God's purposes. By the time Paul is writing (well after the events with Jesus) it is obvious that Gentiles are coming to salvation. Yet what should be understood about the nation of Israel which largely had not followed him? Paul wrote, "The gifts and callings of God are irrevocable"¹ The question of God's dealings with Israel and with other nations may not seem a hot topic to us now, but it was a very hot issue in those times. God had called Israel into covenant with himself, he had made promises to them which had to be honoured.

A key principle is that God deals with the Jews first and then the other nations.

Romans 1:16 I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile.

Romans 2:9-10 There will be trouble and distress for every human being who does evil: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile; but glory, honour and peace for everyone who does good: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile.

So it is when we come to the gospel reading, this is the background principle to the story. Jesus says in the conversation, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel."² There it is again - first for the Jew, then for the Gentile.

¹ Romans 11:29

² Matthew 15:24

Many find the passage difficult. Dr Ian Paul, who was on staff at my theological college, writes:

First, as just about every commentator notes, this passage is indeed challenging—so much so that it is ‘nearly impossible’ (Dr Ben Witherington) to imagine that the story was invented either by Matthew or within his community. In other words, this passage helps to address a challenge from a previous generation, that the gospel stories are unreliable historically and largely a creation of the early Christian community.

If you were making up stories about Jesus, you wouldn’t make this up.

Remember Jesus is the great Apostle of our faith – that is he was sent on a mission. He is repeatedly recorded as saying that he did what he saw the Father doing and he said only what the Father said.

John 5:19 "I tell you the truth, the Son can do nothing by himself; he can do only what he sees his Father doing, because whatever the Father does the Son also does.

John 8:28 I do nothing on my own but speak just what the Father has taught me.

John 12:49-50 For I did not speak of my own accord, but the Father who sent me commanded me what to say and how to say it. ⁵⁰ I know that his command leads to eternal life. So whatever I say is just what the Father has told me to say."

John 14:31 I love the Father and that I do exactly what my Father has commanded me.

Matthew has already given positive exposure to Gentiles in the gospel. The Magi attending the new born Jesus, his early ministry in Galilee of the Gentiles and to Syria and the Decapolis – both Gentile areas. He had delivered the demon-possessed man there. He had healed the Centurion’s servant in Matthew 8:5ff and praised the man’s faith who understood the authority Jesus held. At that point he had warned that Gentiles would find their way into the Kingdom of God while some Jews who should be there would find themselves excluded:

Matthew 8:11-12 ¹¹ I say to you that many will come from the east and the west, and will take their places at the feast with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven. ¹² But the subjects of the kingdom will be thrown outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth."

Jesus does not need any lessons in reaching out beyond Israel – so let’s lay aside any ideas of racism. He has shown himself unusually indeed counter-culturally open to women and ready to honour them. Think of the Samaritan woman who was the first evangelist to the Samaritans after talking to him. He sat and talked with her and taught her in an age when men did not talk to women in public and Jews not to Samaritans.

So one reason for the hesitation to respond to the woman’s insistent cries for help might be this clearly defined mission – was he allowed to deviate from the path he had been given in this case? I believe he had to consult the Father to see what he was to say and do on this occasion.

The other factor is that he may have needed to draw out the woman’s faith. We see that in other interactions where he stretched people to rise to greater faith that they might receive the miracle they desired.

I think there was a teaching point for the disciples who were bothered by her calling out.

I think there is then a teaching point for her to encourage her to press in for the freedom she desired for her daughter.

The theologian R.T. France wrote:

A good teacher may sometimes aim to draw out a pupil’s best insight by a deliberate challenge which does not necessarily represent the teacher’s own view—even if the phrase ‘devil’s advocate’ may not be quite appropriate to this context! ³

³ New International Commentary on the New Testament, p591

The apparently offensive use of the term 'dogs' is worth exploring. Yes, it was a negative term used by Jews of Gentiles. But note this: Jews did not keep house dogs – Greeks did. Jesus used the word for little dogs and both he and she referred to a domestic example of dogs eating what fell from the masters' tables. That would never have happened in a Jewish household of that time! So Jesus was actually using an illustration from Greek households. It was using something from her experience as an example.

That changes the thrust of the conversation entirely. He was not standing back and speaking derogatively as is often misinterpreted. Rather he was explaining the priority of his mission in terms of family endearment and closeness of belonging. Jesus was quite clear that the mission would extend to the gentiles, it was just that the offer had to be made to the Jews first. They were supposed to minister to the rest of the world. He was also to build up the body of disciples who would launch the church into the wider world – that was his priority.

What she did next is similar to Mary at Cana. When the wine ran out, Mary came to Jesus and told him the wine had run out. He responded,

"Dear woman, why do you involve me? My time has not yet come." His mother said to the servants, "Do whatever he tells you."⁴

Jesus seems to be saying it is not in the plan I have received to do public miracles yet. Mary presses for it anyway and he honoured his mother. Some commentators write of her pulling a miracle from the future into her own time by faith. She as it were, reached ahead in time to when it would be Jesus' role to work public miracles and received one from that time.

Here in the region of Tyre which is now Southern Lebanon, this woman from a pagan culture recognized the Jesus had the power to deliver. She called him Lord three times, she addressed him as Son of David. Somehow she had learnt who he was and understood to some degree that he was the Messiah. She reached ahead into the time when the mission of God would spread among the gentiles and pulled a miracle back into her time.

Jesus commended her for it. He granted the request and said she had great faith. In contrast it was only last week that we heard him chide Peter for having little faith when he started to sink on the lake.

Proverbs 25:2 says "It is the glory of God to conceal a matter; to search out a matter is the glory of kings." The possibility of this healing was concealed but she searched the matter out and found it.

I think God does this with us. He conceals matters from us to provoke us to search them out. It is not to prevent us finding them but to stretch us and make us grow. It is so that we value his treasures more for having to search for them.

The Syro-Phoenician woman did not take offence, she did not take umbrage, nor did she give up. She pressed in, knowing something of who Jesus was. As she pressed in she was rewarded. There was a restraint that excluded her at that time. It was not racism, it was not chauvinism, it was about the promised order of events. The time of the Gentiles had not yet come, but by exercising faith and perseverance she effectively reached ahead in time and drew the blessings of the gospel back to her time.

We are in a situation of restraint. Things are not as we wish. We need to observe the restraints which are designed to break the transmission paths of the virus so it dies out. We also need to press into God trusting and knowing that he is good. When we don't get the answer we desire, it may be that there is a higher plan or purpose – just as Jesus was to offer the Kingdom to Israel first before the gentiles. Yet even as Mary and the Syro-Phoenician woman drew the kingdom blessings to themselves ahead of time, so as we persevere in prayer, listen for what God is saying to us and obey him, we may gain answers to our prayers in like manner.

The meeting with the Syro-Phoenician woman tells us that Jesus in his obedience to the will of the Father is listening and open to our pleas. There is a heart of mercy at the throne of God and an ear open to our cries.

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⁴ John 2:4-5