**Gentile woman’s great faith** 28/4/24dkm

Read: Isaiah 35, Mark 7:24-37

Text: Mark 7:24-30

Psalms: 145:1-11, 87, 130, 117

The ‘Harmony of the Gospels’ table at the back of my Bible refers to this passage as, ‘Aborted retirement in Phoenicia; Syro-Phoenician healed’. Earlier in this chapter we saw Jesus under attack from Pharisees out of Jerusalem because his disciples were not keeping ‘the tradition of the elders’. Jesus called them hypocrites and condemned them for nullifying God’s commands. They were offended, and probably went off to plot further action against Jesus. With the Pharisees stirred up, and crowds giving him no rest, Jesus decided to get away for a while with his disciples. He was into the third year of his ministry and wanted more time to teach the twelve.

Retiring to a place across the lake had not worked, so this time he retires to a foreign country: ‘He arose and went to the region of Tyre and Sidon’ (7:24). These were commercial centres on the Phoenician coast- modern day Lebanon. This was the only time Jesus left the borders of Israel. It was quite a distance from Galilee- although not as far as Jerusalem. Jesus entered a house in Tyre, hoping to stay out of the limelight. But even in this foreign country, people had heard about Jesus of Nazareth, and his mighty works and words. One woman in particular, learned where Jesus was staying, and came pleading for Jesus to cast a demon out of her daughter. We will look at her request, at Jesus’ rejection, at her reaction, and at Jesus’ response- four points in all.

**1. Request**

A Greek or Gentile woman, a person born in Phoenicia- which was ruled by the Syrians at that time- came to Jesus begging for his help (7:25,26). Matthew calls her a ‘Canaanite’ (Mat 15:22), a name familiar to the Jews because the land of Israel was originally the land of Canaan. The Canaanites were wicked people who God destroyed by the hand of Joshua. Some Canaanites remained; this woman was a descendant of these original pagan inhabitants. Being outside the covenant, she was without hope and without God (Eph 2:12). But this woman did not let this barrier deter her as she pleaded for her daughter to be healed. This barrier would soon be broken down in Christ Jesus.

This woman was not the first Gentile, and certainly not the last, to come to the true God pleading for mercy. The prophet Elijah encountered a woman, a widow, from Zarephath in Sidon. She called him ‘a man of God’, and when he raised her only son from the dead she was assured that, ‘the word of the Lord in your mouth is truth’ (1Kings 17:24). Then there was Naaman the Syrian who was healed through Elisha’s ministry (Luke 4:25-27). Jesus himself encountered a half-Gentile or Samaritan woman, telling her that, ‘Salvation is of the Jews’, and then that he was the Messiah or Christ (John 4:22-26).

This Syro-Phoenician woman’s little girl was demon-possessed. Somehow she heard that Jesus had come to her town. She also heard, and believed, that Jesus could cast out demons. So she came to Jesus and fell at his feet, begging him to cast the demon out. Matthew has her crying out, ‘Lord, Son of David, have mercy on me!’ (Mat 15:22). ‘Lord’ means ‘Master’ or ‘Sir’, a title of respect. The title, ‘Son of David’ is more specific. To the Jew it was a messianic title. Blind Bartimaeus called out, ‘Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me’ (Luke 18:38). Just what this Gentile woman understood by this title is not clear, but what is clear is that she believed Jesus could heal her suffering daughter. She was not just showing respect; she believed in Jesus.

The approach of this woman is in stark contrast to the approach of the scribes and Pharisees who came from Jerusalem to meet Jesus. They did not even show the respect due a fellow rabbi, but blurted out, ‘Why do your disciples not walk according to the tradition of the elders… ’ (7:5). Then there is the case of the self-righteous Pharisee standing in the temple telling God how good he was (Luke 18:11,12). All we hear from people nowadays is how good they are, and what their rights are. We hear of the right to an abortion, the right to die, the right to homosexual marriage, etc. People feel they have the right to do anything and everything they desire, especially if it is sinful.

Christians can be influenced by this attitude. We hear of people demanding things from God, and getting distraught if God does not deliver. Has this attitude crept into your prayers? If so, take a lesson from this woman who came to Jesus. She had no right to demand anything from Jesus- and neither do you. She cried out, ‘Lord, have mercy on me’, and this is what you must do! I have heard preachers telling people to make their prayers specific; when praying for a new car ask for a bright red BMW, because God wants you to have the best. Is this the sort of attitude we see with this woman? Should not our every prayer begin, ‘Lord have mercy on me a sinner’ (Luke 18:13)?

**2. Rejection**

Jesus had come to this place in Tyre to hide from the public. But this woman showed up at the door, begging him to heal her daughter. What will Jesus do? Recall what he did when the crowd appeared at the deserted place across the lake- he had compassion on them (6:34). Will he have compassion on this non-Jewish woman? Matthew tells us that Jesus, ‘answered her not a word’ (Mat 15:23). Did he not hear? Sure he heard! So why not answer her? At least he did not send her away, as his disciples urged him to do when she started crying out to them to support her request (Mat 15:23).

Eventually Jesus answered this woman, but not by agreeing to her request. What Jesus said seems uncharacteristic and insulting to us today, but was nothing new to the disciples, or to this woman. What did Jesus say to the Gentile woman pleading with him to help her young daughter: ‘Let the children be filled first, for it is not good to take the children’s bread and throw it to little dogs’ (7:27). Matthew records the same words, but after Jesus explains, ‘I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel' (Mat 15:24 ESV). He said the same thing to the disciples when he sent them on mission (Mat 10:6).

When our little grandson sits in his high chair eating dinner, the family dog sits under the chair waiting for any scraps that fall. Sometimes that scrap is snatched from a hand that reaches out from the chair! They did not have high chairs in the time of Jesus, but we all get the picture. Jesus was probably saying what was commonly said by the people. He does point out that ‘the children be filled first’, thereby allowing for left-overs for others (7:27). And again, Jesus had not sent her away. The door was left ajar, as it were, for this woman to continue her pleading with Jesus.

Her humble and sincere cry for mercy continued. Humility and sincerity are important when approaching the Lord, but they are not sufficient. This woman’s cry focused on Jesus because she knew Jesus could answer her prayer. She believed only Jesus could grant her request, even if he appeared reluctant to do so. She persisted in prayer, as we must do. She was like the widow, in the parable told by Jesus, pleading with the unjust judge for justice (Luke 18:1-8). In that parable Jesus links humble and persistent prayer with faith, which is what we see in this true story.

Some suggest that Jesus was testing this woman’s faith, and others that he was teaching his disciples a lesson. William Barclay comments, and others agree that, ‘even a thing which seems hard can be said with a disarming smile… we can be quite sure that the smile on Jesus’ face, and the compassion in his eyes, robbed the words of all insult and bitterness’. But can we start imagining when Jesus had a smile on his face?

Jesus did not mean that salvation is only for the Jews; he meant that salvation is from the Jews, and therefore for the Jews first. God sent his Son into this world in fulfilment of promises he made to the Jews. Jesus came to his own, but they did not receive him (John 1:11). The Jews rejected Jesus. So why not go to the Gentiles we might ask. That is what the apostle Paul did when the Jews rejected him and the gospel he preached. But this is to ignore the very purpose for which Jesus came into the world.

Jesus was sent by the Father to make atonement for sin- not to heal every sick person in the world. To make atonement for sin he had to give his life as the sacrifice for sin- according to the Scriptures. He had to die in Jerusalem, according to the Scriptures (Mat 16:21). The salvation he proclaimed, and which he effected on the cross, was for the Jew first- but not only Jews. This very story, like the earlier account of the centurion’s servant (Mat 8:5-13), shows that Jesus welcomed Gentiles into the kingdom of God. Indeed, he highlighted the great faith of these two Gentiles. But we are jumping ahead.

**3. Reaction**

We might be offended by Jesus referring to us as ‘little dogs’, but the woman wasn’t. She did not turn away, or stamp off cursing all Jews, and all men for their arrogance, misogyny, or whatever. She did not let pride assume rule in her heart; what ruled in her heart was passion, passion for her little girl. He daughter was very ill and she believed Jesus could heal her. Her passion was mixed with faith in Jesus. Love and faith- what a beautiful and blessed combination to have in your heart. They combined to produce a most profound response to the words of Jesus. Her answer touched the very heart of Jesus.

‘Yes, Lord’ she said, ‘yet even the little dogs under the table eat from the children’s crumbs’ (7:28, cf. Mat 15:27). ‘She knew she did not belong to Israel and thus had no claim as belonging to the chosen people. But surely there would be crumbs!’ (Morris). This Gentile woman was ready to settle for even the crumbs that fell from the table of the Son of David, the Lord Jesus Christ. She recognised that Jesus was a Jew, ‘the Son of David’ and that Jews had priority, but she also believed that Jesus had compassion for the lost of every nation, not just Israel, and that he had sufficient grace and power to save any and all who come to him, as she was doing. She had faith to be healed; actually for her daughter to be healed even though the girl was not present (7:30). It would be a case of healing by word only, as with the centurion’s servant (Mat 9:13).

**4. Response of Jesus**

This woman showed great humility in the presence of Jesus. When was the last time you ‘fell at his feet’ in desperate need. She showed great persistence in prayer. How many people have you seen giving up on Jesus at the first hurdle, as it were? But Jesus does not commend her for these things. What he commends her for is her faith. It was her faith that made her humble. It was her faith that made her persist in prayer. We cannot be humble without faith. Is it lack of faith that prevents you from being humble? We cannot persist in prayer without faith. Is it lack of faith that hinders your prayer?

Jesus was deeply moved by this woman’s response to his seemingly harsh answer. Her response was ‘witty’, but also understanding of who Jesus is; it revealed faith in Jesus. Matthew records Jesus saying, ‘O woman, great is your faith! Let it be as you desire!’ (Mat 15:28). He answered her prayer; her daughter was healed that very hour. Mark has Jesus responding, ‘For this saying go your way; the demon has gone out of your daughter’ (7:29). She showed her faith in coming to Jesus, and in going home believing what Jesus said. The only faith that Jesus calls ‘great’ is the faith of this Gentile woman. Only her faith, and that of another Gentile, namely the centurion, does he publically praise. In both cases Jesus healed without the sick person being present.

Yes, salvation is for the Jew first, but Jesus clearly demonstrates that he came to save the elect from all nations, because all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. He came to fulfil the promise given to Abraham that in him all the families of the earth would be blessed (Gen 12:3). Abraham is the father not only of ‘the circumcision’ or the Jews, but all who share his faith. Salvation is entirely dependent on faith. All who are saved are saved by grace alone, through faith alone, in Jesus Christ alone. Is this what you believe? What does Jesus say about your faith?