

**Pentecost 11**  
**20/8/2017**

**Mark the Evangelist**

**Isaiah 56:1, 6-8**

**Psalm 67**

**Matthew 15:10-28**

**Who let the dogs in?**

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“Dogs”, we tell ourselves, is not a very nice way to speak about people who are different from us. Such a sentiment, then, on the lips of *Jesus*, is kind of “uncomfortable”.

With a view to softening the blow, it’s not uncommon these days to imagine that here we see that even Jesus is “human” – even he can be wrong in his estimation of others, even he has things to learn. This is declared sometimes almost with relief – if Jesus gets it wrong, then we feel a little better when we do – and thanks is given to God for the strength of character of this courageous woman who, through her persistence, teaches Jesus an important lesson.

And yet, why is it that in every other instance in the gospels Jesus is apparently always in “control”, always understanding, leading, directing, challenging and rebuking appropriately, but that just here – at an otherwise unremarkable point in the story – he drops the ball? More likely he does not and we are simply seeing and hearing the wrong thing here.

Over the last couple of weeks we’ve been playing with the nature of the biblical text – the *intention* of its forms in parable and miracle, how these elements operate and cooperate in proclaiming God’s kingdom. Here we have another miracle story, although the shock of what Jesus says is so great that it pretty much overshadows the shock of the miracle. The modern liberal response here is not so much, “Jesus could not have healed the girl,” as it is, “Jesus ought not to have said that.”

But let’s take a deep breath and bring our thinking over recent weeks to bear here also. We have heard from Jesus that the parables are told because they both hide and reveal. This we have also extended to the way the miracles stories work in the narrative. What, then, is being seen and not perceived, heard and not understood, as we hear today’s story? If we attend to what actually happens in the exchange between the Gentile and Jesus, we see that she gets what she desires not because of her quick wit but because she actually *agrees* with Jesus: “*Yes, Lord*”; “*Yes, Lord, a dog, and yet even the dogs gather up the crumbs from under the children’s table*”.

“*Yes, Lord, and yet...*” Jesus meets this with, “Great is your faith!” But what *is* this faith? It is not that Jesus could heal her daughter, otherwise he would have met her first request with the declaration and the healing. The faith she demonstrates is in the connection between her “Yes” and her “and yet.” Yes, it is the *children’s* bread and yet it is for *me*, too. Her “faith” is that she recites the promise of God that all the nations will be blessed with, or through, God’s “children”, Israel. Her faith is in the one who made this promise, and she speaks God’s promise to Jesus, and Jesus replies, *Amen*.

We are in the same kind of space we discovered last week. There Peter said to Jesus on the water, I will know that it is you if you command me to come to you, and make it that I can. Today, the woman says to Jesus, You are my God too, if you are the God of Israel. With you, Jesus, crumbs are enough.

The *miracle* in each story indicates the offence – the utter strangeness – of what is said in the exchanges in the story. Does God really give what God commands? Does God *command* righteousness, and then *give* it? This is not how it works with our commands and it would be a miracle if it did. We imagine that God commands that we be his, and that we must then *become* his, *earning* this relationship.

And can crumbs be enough? Not with “real” bread, which is why Hotham Mission has put much time and money into food programs and food security research. But this is not a story about bread as such; it is about relationship, participation and blessing. Bread is here a metaphor for these things, which is to say that these things are as essential for life as bread.

The bread metaphor, however, is extended beautifully by the woman’s quip about the crumbs, by which she declares not “I also *deserve* to be fed” but rather, “So abundant is God’s provision of bread to his children that there are *leftovers*” – “crumbs”. She speaks the gospel, as did Peter when he challenged Jesus on the stormy waters. [It is worth noting in passing that we’ve only just heard of a miraculous feeding, after which 12 baskets of “crumbs” were collected; and another follows today’s story, after which 7 baskets are collected.]

Whereas our concern tends to be about the woman’s feelings at being excluded because of who she is, she appears in the story not as one *offended* by Jesus but as one *confident* in the quality of the bread he brings to the “children”. We are not to defend her, but to believe as she believes.

What is it that she believes? That it is through these few that the many are blessed. And what does this *mean*, practically? How is it also *our* truth? We can perhaps drive the point home most clearly with a little “embodied” demonstration. Look to the person next to you and say to them, “Woof!” Are we not all here “Gentile dogs”? The church – which almost completely Gentile – has its very being from the crumbs of God’s love for Israel. We forget this and, in the forgetting, we harden grace into law – we make ourselves the source of the blessing (which is why we take offence at Jesus here).

But the church is not a community constructed out of the convergence of general goodness (in which, for example, the Canaanite woman shares); it is an *emergence* from a blessing which took place in a particular time and place which is not *our* time and place. We have a part in the people of God not because we are somehow equal to everyone else, and so are naturally *deserving* of good standing before God. God started somewhere else, and we have been picked up along the way.

It does not matter *in the end* who is first and who is second, who is fed at the table and who is not, for all will be fed. But we forget the ordering at *our* peril – the peril of self-righteousness – *and* at the peril of all to whom *we* might be a blessing.

This is because we obscure the way God works in the world at the risk of what God actually offers. We speak so easily in the church of forgiveness but what is forgiveness if not the gift of life from *outside* of us, a blessing with its origin outside of us? In fact, this leads us to a connection which is little short of horrifying for good-minded people such as we are: we might see in our story this morning that the Canaanite woman is “forgiven” for not being a Jew.

This, of course, makes no *moral* sense, because morals are all about responsibility for fault, and she is no more responsible for her heritage than anyone could possibly be. This is why we take offence here, moralists that we tend to be. It makes no *moral* sense but it makes good *theological* sense to speak of her being “forgiven” in this way, because forgiveness is properly defined not by the fault but by the *gift*. And the gift is always the same: Sinner? *You are mine*, says God. Canaanite? *Mine*. Dead? *Mine*.

The basis upon which that extraordinary woman made her appeal to Jesus is same basis upon which the Christian *becomes* a Christian in conversion, on which she confesses sin and *expects* to hear the absolution, on which she takes the death and life of another in sharing bread and wine around a table as a source of new life.

The gift is always the same – that we are claimed – and it always comes from beyond us. And this is why Christians are called to be lovers and givers in the form of evangelism and the service of others. For love is not mere attraction but, more completely, gift. Giving is not at all *exchange* but the one-way flow of love to another in some concrete form of blessing. And this is always good news.

Such love and such a flow are what we see in the Loving Giver in our story today, who has set as his own reason for being: to let the dogs in.

Such love and such a flow are to be the shape of our own lives. Let us, then, so love and so give, to God’s greater glory and to the richer humanity of all who still hunger for the children’s bread.

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