

Isaiah 56:1, 6-8

Psalm 67

Matthew 15:10-2

Who let the dogs in? (Reprise)

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*In a sentence:*

*The love of God finds us all in the end, whoever we think we are*

### **Dogs**

Today, continuing on from the readings of the last couple of weeks, we hear another miracle story. Yet this one is different because the problem it presents is not the problem of miracles but the shock to modern sensibilities of what Jesus *says* (recall the scandal of the parables). The modern response here is less, “Jesus could not possibly have healed the girl,” than it is, “Jesus ought not to have said that.” “Dogs” 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 more than a little “uncomfortable”. If Jesus doesn’t jump in quickly with the mandatory celebrity apology, he risks being cancelled.

He doesn’t apologise, and if the church also can’t quite cancel Jesus, it’s common these days to imagine that here even Jesus reveals himself to be “human” – *even he* has things to learn. And thanks is then given to God for 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 the one who understands, leads, directs, challenges and rebukes *appropriately*, but that *just here* – at an otherwise unremarkable point in the story – he drops the ball? More likely, he does not, and our gut response springs from simply seeing and hearing the wrong thing here.

What, then, is being seen and not perceived, heard and not understood, as we hear today’s story? If we attend to what in fact happens in the exchange between the woman and Jesus, we see that her faith is affirmed not because she shames Jesus but because she *agrees* with him: “Yes, Lord”; “Yes, Lord, a dog, *and yet* even the dogs gather up the crumbs from under the children’s table”.

### **Faith**

The woman’s “Yes, Lord, *and yet...*” is met with Jesus’ response, “Great is your faith!” But what *is* this faith? It is not that Jesus could heal her daughter, otherwise her first request would already have proven her faith, and led to the healing. Her “faith” is that 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 – with you, Jesus, crumbs are enough – and Jesus replies, *Amen*.

But *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; 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 woman’s quip about crumbs stretches the metaphor beautifully, 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”. (It is worth noting in passing

that we've only just heard of a miraculous feeding, after which twelve baskets of "crumbs" were collected, and another follows today's story, after which seven baskets are collected.)

Whereas our concern tends to be about the woman's feelings at being called a dog, 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, then, not to defend her but to believe as she believes.

She believes that it is through God's few that the many are blessed. And what does this *mean*, practically? How is this also *our* truth – for that is the only reason we might bother with it? We can perhaps drive the point home most clearly with a little "embodied" demonstration. Turn and look at the person next to you, and now 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, of course, and in the forgetting we harden grace into law. We make ourselves the source of a blessing we can give or withhold, according to whether we think we're dealing with children or dogs.

We here are one small part of the emergence from a blessing which took place in a particular time and place which is not *our* time and place. We are a part of the people of God not because God is one and loves everyone the same way. God loved someone else first, and we have been picked up along the way. Of course, in the end, it does not matter 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 a gift of life from *outside* of us, a blessing with its origin outside of us?

### ***For-given***

And this leads us to a connection which is little short of horrifying for good-minded people such as we think we are: we can now see in our story this morning that the Canaanite woman is "for-given" for not being a Jew.

This, of course, makes no *moral* sense, because morals are all about responsibility for fault, and this woman 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 "for-given" 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 the same basis upon which the Christian *becomes* a Christian in conversion, on which he confesses sin and *expects* to hear the absolution, on which he takes as his own 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 by God – and it always comes from beyond us. This is why Christians are called to be lovers and givers in evangelism and the service of others. Love is not mere attraction but is, more completely, gift.

He probably didn't, but Jesus might have said, "With what can we compare the kingdom of heaven, or what parable will we use for it? It is like a dog who licks up the crumbs under the children's table."

The ministry of Jesus was to feed the children, and to let the dogs in. Such love and such a flow of blessing are to be the shape of our own lives.

Let us, then, love and give, puppy to puppy, to God's greater glory and to the richer humanity of all who still hunger for the children's bread.

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