

“FOLLOWING THE KING - 44”

Matthew 15:21-28

Well, on this Mothering Sunday morning, we arrive at a story in Matthew’s Gospel which is all about a mother – a mother consumed with concern for her daughter. This woman seems totally focussed on her daughter's suffering – naturally enough – and is desperate to get someone to help her. I imagine her as one of those Chinese people wanting news of their loved ones at the press conferences about the Malaysia Airline disaster – shouting, screaming, angry, anxious, unable to think about anything else. And I’m sure the mothers here this morning will have been through similar, if not quite so dramatic, experiences with your children at some point. But this mother’s encounter with Jesus is a very interesting and significant one, included by both Matthew and Mark in their accounts of Jesus’ life and Ministry. Mark’s version emphasises some details and omits others compared with Matthew’s take on events, but it’s Matthew’s we’re going to concentrate on this morning.

You may remember that Jesus has had another run-in with the Pharisees, the guardians of religious and cultural tradition and the gatekeepers of the Law. They’re a bit like the KGB and the Spanish Inquisition all rolled into one. They came to Jesus to get him to explain why he and his disciples seemed to treat the traditions of their religion so lightly and Jesus has had to tell them that the values of the Kingdom of God, which he has come to inaugurate, are totally at odds with an emphasis on outward ritual and what he sees as their hypocrisy. Clearly such debates and arguments take their toll on Jesus – after all, sharing our humanity he is affected by the same physical, emotional and psychological pressures that we all have to deal with and none of us really likes to be arguing all the time (although I have my suspicions about one or two people!).

So Matthew tells us that he “*withdraws*” from Gennesaret, the village on the shore of the Sea of Galilee where he has been preaching, teaching and healing. He’s looking for some peace and quiet and, significantly, goes into “*the region of Tyre and Sidon*”. That was an area to the north of Galilee, but it was also a Gentile area. In stepping into that territory, Jesus would once again have rendered himself ritually unclean. He is emphasising his break with the merely outward, man-made conventions that accompany the religion of the Pharisees. It’s probably a bit difficult for us to grasp what an important step this was as we don’t have the same kind of territorial distinctions today: maybe it’s a bit like a preacher trying to get a bit of peace and quiet after a big debate by going into a strip club! But this story would have had an enormous impact on the first readers of Matthew’s Gospel, who, you may recall, were people from Matthew’s church, Jewish believers wondering if it was OK to follow this new Kingly Messiah or whether it meant that they were betraying the faith of their forebears.

And Matthew begins the account in Greek with the words *καὶ ἰδοὺ*. This is at the beginning of v22, but there's no point looking at your Bible because the NIV, in common with most other versions, doesn't translate them. I think they're translated in the King James Version as "*And behold*". They might be rendered as "*And would you believe it ...*" A woman approaches Jesus – this mother who is so deeply affected by her daughter's suffering, which she identifies as having a demonic origin. But this isn't any old woman. This is "*a Canaanite woman*". Not only is Jesus now on Gentile soil, but he's being harassed by a Gentile woman. In fact, this isn't just a Gentile, not even just a pagan woman. This is a representative of The Old Enemy. It's the only time in the New Testament a Canaanite is mentioned, but they were the mortal enemies of the Jews. The Jewish people had taken their land, had destroyed their idols, had fought with them for centuries. And now this woman comes and rants at Jesus. She just won't shut up – again, very much like the relatives of the airline passengers we mentioned earlier.

And Jesus just ignores her. He doesn't utter a word. But she won't go away and keeps referring to him as "*the Son of David*" – a messianic title of which she must have been aware of the significance. She has no doubt heard news from Galilee about this travelling preacher and healer, this man who seems to fit the criteria for Messianic recognition, and she believes he can do something. Yes, she's desperate. Yes, she's a Gentile. Yes, she's willing to try anything. But somewhere there's a faith in Jesus' ability to help her. The trouble is, there doesn't seem to be any willingness to help her. And in the end the disciples get fed up with her. They tell Jesus to grant her request and get rid of her. It's clear they want him to do something for her rather than simply send her away because of the way Jesus responds.

And this is where the controversy begins. Jesus initially refuses to help her because she's not from the right ethnic and religious background. He has come, he tells them, "*only to the lost sheep of Israel*". He's not going to help any foreigner: that's not part of his mission. It's hard for us to get our heads round that, isn't it? This Kingly Messiah, this herald of the Kingdom of God, this Saviour of the world – we thought he'd come for everyone. But there's no getting away from his words here. Our Lord, who we thought had broken down barriers, in whom, so Paul tells us, there is no male nor female, Jew nor Gentile, slave nor free, is actually prepared only to do stuff for the Jews. Where have we been going wrong all these years?

Well, the Hebrew Scriptures, our Old Testament, make it clear over and over and over again that the Jewish people are God's chosen people. The whole of the Old Testament is the story of God's preservation of these people against sometimes overwhelming odds. He expresses his love for them in sometimes very maternal language, sometimes very erotic language, always very passionate language. We read of his intervention in their affairs and his protection of them in times of war, famine, disaster and exile. God himself clearly loves the Jewish people and clearly has a reason for his affection for and

favouring of them. And again, as you read through the Old Testament, you can see clearly what that reason is – he will bless all people through them. They are ultimately to share their blessings with all humanity. God is using them as his means of bringing salvation to the world.

It's into this Jewish nation that Jesus is born. After all, if Jesus is to be truly human, he has to be born in a particular place – be it Israel or India, Palestine or Peru. And God's plan was that he should be born into Israel. And that's where he has to start his mission, amongst the people into which he was born. He has already made that clear in his commission to the disciples in *Matthew 10:5,6* – *These twelve Jesus sent out with the following instructions: "Do not go among the Gentiles or enter any town of the Samaritans. Go rather to the lost sheep of Israel"*. That was God's plan. He was going to start off with the Jewish people. And, of course, there were the human limitations of Jesus. He couldn't do everything. He had to focus somewhere. He had his target audience. Eugene Peterson's translation of v24 brings that out remarkably well: Jesus said, *"I've got my hands full dealing with the lost sheep of Israel."*

Now, you may object that Jesus has healed Gentiles before. There were the people from Syria, from the Decapolis and the towns beyond Jordan – all Gentile territories – who came to him in Galilee. We read about that in *4:24,25*. And there was the servant of the Roman centurion in *8:5-13*. But they were all people who came to Jesus on Israel's soil. It wasn't Jesus going off into their areas to work with them. This woman – this Canaanite woman – is a Gentile in a Gentile land. And Jesus won't help her out because she doesn't fit the criteria. But she's also a mother, and the mother of a girl who is suffering – so she keeps on at him. She's kneeling down in front of him and howling.

And then Jesus says something even more astonishing. "I'm not going to take the good things I've come to share with Israel and chuck it to dogs like you." At that time "dogs" was an abusively racist term used for non-Jews, so Jesus clearly knew what he was saying. As we've said many times before, it's a great shame you can't tell from the written word what tone of voice was being used. Nor does it say anything about the expression on Jesus' face. Some commentators – William Barclay, for example – try to soften the impact of all this and get Jesus off the hook by saying that Jesus said this with a wry smile on his face and he was having a bit of a joke with her. Unfortunately, there's no evidence either way and Jesus could just as easily have been totally exasperated by this woman's rabbiting on that he lost his cool for a moment. I suppose we'll never know.

But the woman accepts that. "Fair enough," she says. "But even dogs like me can go round picking up the odd bits that get left lying round. Some of it's got to rub off on us." An inkling there maybe that Israel won't get it all. And Jesus relents. He sees the point of her witty comment and acknowledges her *"great faith"* – her *mega-faith*, as the Greek literally puts it – and heals her daughter there and then.

So what's this all about then? Persistent faith? Power to heal? Racism? Maternal insistence? Well, that's probably all rolled up in it, but I'd suggest that this is about the Kingdom once again, about God's sovereign rule and the scope of its influence. This is about the Kingdom of God which was predicted by the Hebrew prophets – the poets and preachers of the Old Testament, who looked forward to a Kingdom that would eventually embrace all of creation, a Kingdom that would draw all peoples and nations into the orbit of its justice, righteousness and peace. Now, startlingly, that future Kingdom is starting to break into the present. We've seen aspects of that already as the healing power of God has been demonstrated, as Jesus has overcome demonic forces, as the values of justice and righteousness at the heart of the Kingdom have been not only proclaimed but exemplified in Jesus. God's Kingdom has been breaking into the life of his people. Now that healing, that love, that transforming power has been shown to be available beyond God's chosen people. Other races, other nations are getting a glimpse of it all.

The message that the disciples were to preach to *"the lost sheep of Israel"* in chapter 10 was that *"The Kingdom of heaven [God] is near."* This Kingdom is about to leak into this world and change it forever. And part of the message of the coming Kingdom is that it will be for all people. Here's a glimpse of that, says Matthew. The future is breaking into the present. It's a slow process, but in this chapter we find ourselves part way between chapter 10 – *"Go rather to the lost sheep of Israel"* – and chapter 28 – *"Go and make disciples of all nations"*.

Israel are the people of promise. God has chosen them and promised them so much. Right from the time of Abraham, God has promised to work in and through these people. But all along, right from the very beginning, from God's first words to Abram (as he still was then) in *Genesis 12*, God's intentions have been clear: *"All peoples on earth will be blessed by you."* Their destiny is to share the promised blessings of God, to share the prospect of peace, of wholeness, of salvation, of transformation with the whole world. That's what's happening here. Yet another glimpse of the Kingdom.

But we've moved on from here, haven't we? All kinds of things have happened since this episode – the death, resurrection and glorification of Jesus; the coming of the Holy Spirit; the clear call of God to Peter to get on and share the good news of Jesus with the Romans; the call of Paul to preach to Gentile Europe. But the fulfilment of the Kingdom is still some way off. It's not here yet, but we believe it's on its way because we have been given so many glimpses of it. And we're called, in the exercise of our faith in Jesus, to continue to offer glimpses of that Kingdom as we live our lives here in Lichfield. In our words, actions, attitudes and values, we demonstrate that the future is breaking into the present and that the love of Jesus is at work.

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After his argument with the Pharisees, Jesus "*withdraws*" from Gennesaret, the village on the shore of the Sea of Galilee where he has been preaching, teaching and healing, and goes into "*the region of Tyre and Sidon*". That was an area to the north of Galilee, but it was also a Gentile area. In stepping into that territory, Jesus would once again have rendered himself ritually unclean. He is emphasising his break with the merely outward, man-made conventions that accompany the religion of the Pharisees.

A woman approaches Jesus. This is "*a Canaanite woman*", a representative of The Old Enemy. It's the only time in the New Testament a Canaanite is mentioned, but they were the mortal enemies of the Jews. The Jewish people had taken their land, had destroyed their idols, had fought with them for centuries. And now this woman comes and rants at Jesus. And Jesus just ignores her. He doesn't utter a word. But she won't go away and keeps referring to him as "*the Son of David*" – a messianic title of which she must have been aware of the significance. Somewhere there's a faith in Jesus' ability to help her. The trouble is, there doesn't seem to be any willingness to help her. And in the end the disciples get fed up with her. They tell Jesus to grant her request and get rid of her.

Jesus initially refuses to help her because she's not from the right ethnic and religious background. He has come, he tells them, "*only to the lost sheep of Israel*". But the Old Testament, makes it clear over and over again that the Jewish people are God's chosen people. The whole of the Old Testament is the story of God's preservation of these people against sometimes overwhelming odds. We read of his intervention in their affairs and his protection of them in times of war, famine, disaster and exile. God has a reason for his favouring of them: he will bless all people through them. They are ultimately to share their blessings with all humanity. God is using them as his means of bringing salvation to the world.

It's into this Jewish nation that Jesus is born. And that's where he has to start his mission (look at *Matthew 10:5,6*). And then Jesus says something even more astonishing (v26). At that time "dogs" was an abusively racist term used for non-Jews, so Jesus clearly knew what he was saying. But the woman accepts that. "Fair enough," she says. "But even dogs like me can go round picking up the odd bits that get left lying round. And Jesus relents. He sees the point of her witty comment and acknowledges her "*great faith*" and heals her daughter there and then.

This is about the Kingdom of God, which would eventually embrace all of creation, a Kingdom that would draw all peoples and nations into the orbit of its justice, righteousness and peace. Now that future Kingdom is starting to break into the present. God's Kingdom has been breaking into the life of his people. Now that healing, that love, that transforming power has been shown to be available beyond God's chosen people. Other races, other nations are getting a glimpse of it all.

The message that the disciples were to preach to "*the lost sheep of Israel*" in chapter 10 was that "*The Kingdom of heaven [God] is near.*" And part of the message of the coming Kingdom is that it will be for all people. Here's a glimpse of that: the future is breaking into the present. This is part way between *Matthew 10:5,6* and *28:19*.

All kinds of things have happened since this episode – the death, resurrection and glorification of Jesus; the coming of the Holy Spirit; the clear call of God to Peter to get on and share the good news of Jesus with the Romans; the call of Paul to preach to Gentile Europe. But the fulfilment of the Kingdom is still some way off. It's not here yet, but we believe it's on its way because we have been given so many glimpses of it. And we're called, in the exercise of our faith in Jesus, to continue to offer glimpses of that Kingdom in our words, actions, attitudes and values.

Questions for discussion

1. Why do you think Jesus initially ignored the woman?
2. Why is Jesus so insistent on his mission being only to Israel?
3. Is Jesus simply being racist here? Why/why not?
4. What do you think is the status of Israel today? Should we be evangelising amongst Jewish people?
5. What glimpses of the Kingdom can you discern in our community?