



St Marylebone  
Parish Church

**Wednesday 4<sup>th</sup> 2020 1.10 pm Eucharist for Healing**

*Jeremiah 31.1-7 & Matthew 15.21-28 (Sermon)*

*In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.*

Today's gospel always makes for difficult reading, not least because Jesus seems to behave in a way that is not at all characteristic of him.

Not for the desperate pleading Canaanite woman the instant welcoming, all-embracing encounter with Jesus, the Jewish rabbi from Galilee, but a forbidding, harsh brush-off from someone who is clear that they have no time for those who live or worship outside the strictures of orthodox Jewish faith.

When the woman first asks for his help, Jesus doesn't even answer her; he ignores her completely, and his disciples, not content with just ignoring her, ask Jesus if they can shoo away this troublesome impediment to their onward journey.

Even when she continues with her cries for help and refuses to take Jesus' silence and the disciples' hostility for an answer, Jesus only speaks to extinguish any hope of help she might have had, "Look" he says, "my mission, my ministry, is to Israel, not to you and your sort!"

It is almost as if we meet a completely different Jesus to the one we have come to know from the rest of the Gospel accounts of his ministry.

Where is the compassionate and kind Jesus who went out of his way to transcend barriers of gender and class and creed? Where is the Jesus who welcomed all who came to him?

First and foremost, the story of the Canaanite woman is a story about boundaries and borders.

Jesus has travelled north of Galilee into the area we now know as southern Lebanon; the contested and disputed and contested borderlands between Jew and Gentile.

Wherever they are encountered, borders engender dispute and antagonism. Borders seem to exude destructive tension by their very existence.

To the Jews, the Canaanites were the irredeemably corrupt people Israel had had to expel at God's command from the Promised Land before they could take possession of it.

So how could a faithful Jewish rabbi, like Jesus, someone for whom not a 'jot nor a tittle of the Law' was unnecessary, be expected to treat a Canaanite woman as though she were an Israelite?

How could he - or she for that matter - cross the long-fixed and ever-impermeable boundary between the people of God and God's enemies?

In the whole of the New Testament, there is nowhere where Jesus' Jewishness is more apparent than here in this painful encounter along the coasts of Tyre and Sidon.

But for all of his Jewish pre-conditioning, in response to the woman's pleading, Jesus does, at last, break out of his cultural and religious straightjacket and meet the woman at her point of need and bring healing and wholeness to her daughter.

Jesus does so, not because the woman adroitly parries his parable about feeding scraps to dogs, but because Jesus senses her deep and profound

faith; something, he and his disciples, had not expected to find outside the closely patrolled boundaries of Israel.

The received wisdom went something like this: Israel's calling was to be the light of the nations, the blessing by which all non-Jewish nations would eventually be blessed. Israel was God's witness to the world, 'the city set on a hill' for all to see, the Chosen People through whom all would eventually come to believe.

Even Paul, the great 'Apostle to the Gentiles', knew that salvation was: 'to the Jew first, and *then* to the Greek'; that Israel had the priority in God's purpose for the world.

Jews expected that it would be only when Israel was truly herself, when she had become fully the special, holy, chosen people of God that the nations would, at last, be able to turn to God and be blessed like her.

For the sake of the nations then, as well as for Israel, was Jesus sent to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.

Jesus had no divine mandate to anticipate the time when Israel's blessing would reach out and embrace and bring in the Gentiles.

But the Canaanite woman's evident faith brought Jesus to a point of epiphany; to a new understanding that God's eternal plan of salvation could embrace all people – even the Canaanites, not at some far away, long off, future time, but now!

On the borderlands of Israel and Canaan, Jesus finds a Gentile woman prepared and ready - more than prepared and ready - to receive the Messianic blessings he has been appointed and anointed to bring to Israel.

By and through her faith, the woman crosses the boundary of ages, and it is her faith that draws Jesus across the all-too-well-charted territory that divides Israel from her neighbours and enemies.

By and through her faith, the woman is welcomed and included; she is adopted into the New Israel, and Jesus shows his disciples that his message is not just *blind* to the boundaries which separate the righteous and the unrighteous, the respectable and the outcasts who exist INSIDE Israel, but to the boundaries which exist to separate Jew and Gentile.

In his borderland journeying, Jesus discovers that to belong to the people of God is not just to be the object of God's exclusive love, but to be the very vehicle of God's inclusive love for all.

I wonder where our boundaries and deep-seated prejudices lie? Where are the places – not just *out there* but *here* deep in our hearts - where we do not expect God to be at work?

In and through this great and inclusive sacrament we now share, may Jesus' love break down the barriers in our lives and help us to reach out in love across the dangerous borderlands we try to maintain, so that God's healing and reconciling love might be made known. Amen.