

20.8.2017 St John with St Mark, Bury

Trinity 10. Isaiah 56:1,6-8 Romans 11: 1-2a, 29-32. Matthew 15:21-28.

Matthew's Gospel is the most Jewish of the four gospels in the New Testament. Time and time again, Matthew will say that something is said or done to fulfil the words of a prophet. Matthew portrays Jesus as being the new Moses, bringing down the new Law at the Sermon on the Mount. It is Matthew who says that not even a jot or tittle will pass away from the Law before Jesus' mission is fulfilled. Matthew's Gospel is *the* Jewish gospel.

And yet there is this most bemusing story involving Jesus and a Canaanite, non-Jewish, Gentile woman.

The woman approaches Jesus. She asks that the Jewish messiah should cure her daughter who is possessed and tormented by a devil. The disciples urge Jesus to send her away, after all a Gentile woman should have nothing to do with the Jewish messiah. Jesus actually colludes with the disciples, by saying that he was sent to the lost of the house of Israel. The woman persists. Jesus says that it is not right to throw the children's bread to the dogs. Now this is actually highly abusive. Even in our culture, to call a woman a dog is highly offensive. Yet that is what Jesus does. But the woman takes the abuse and runs with it. 'Even the dogs eat the scraps that fall from the children's table'. And that causes Jesus to change his mind. He heals her daughter and praises the woman's faith.

So why does Matthew recount this not very savoury story? I think that there are three basic reasons for recalling this story.

Firstly, Jesus changes his mind. He may be going to the lost sheep of the house of Israel, but that does not mean that there are not wider concerns. Indeed, from this moment Jesus is caught up in a mission to the Gentiles. Jesus is changed by the circumstances which face him. Now this is important for us. If Jesus, our Lord and Master can change his mind over his mission, then so can we. We might have started out saying we will go for the lost sheep of the house of the Church of England. But along comes an asylum-seeker from Iran who wants to be baptized and we have to adjust to welcome in him and, logically, any other Iranian. Circumstance causes us to change.

The second basic reason for this story is that Jesus is seen to be speaking to a woman. In that society, men did not speak to strange women, but only women to whom they were related by household, marriage or family. Jesus could even render himself impure by speaking to the woman. Yet Jesus does speak with her and, even more, has his mind changed for him by the rigour of her argument. The Gospel he is proclaiming breaks the gender boundaries and causes Jesus not merely to speak with the woman but to even take her argument seriously and change his own mind.

The third basic reason as to why Matthew told this story is because the woman is a Gentile. By the time Matthew was writing his gospel, in a bout AD70, it had become apparent that the Gospel was not just for Jews but for all peoples, Jews and Gentiles alike. Indeed the Early Church split over this issue. When Peter had received his vision of the sail being lowered from heaven and unclean beasts being in the sail, and the voice commanding him to kill and eat, Peter knew that Gentiles were to be accepted. And Peter goes to help the gentile seeking him out. But this had split the Church. The split deepened with the apostle Paul who, in Romans, Galatians and elsewhere, theorized a God who reached out to Jew and Gentile alike. A small group of Christians still believed that the Gospel was for Jews alone. The majority of the Church went with Peter and Paul and agreed that the Gospel was for all people.

This is amazing. The Law has to be laid aside as Christians, a renewed Israel, introduces a new Law. The new Law is rooted in the commandments of the Old Testament: You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind, body and strength and you shall love your neighbour as yourself. From these commandments of love, Matthew builds up the new Law in the Sermon on the Mount. And this new Law finds its fulfilment in the story of the Canaanite woman. Jesus is obedient to the new Law and eventually changes his mind and heals the woman's daughter.

Now this has real implications for us now. I think most of us are aware of the violence at Charlottesville in the USA. The violence was between neo-Nazis, the Ku Klux Klan and other white supremacists being opposed by anti-fascist groups. A woman was killed when a white supremacist drove a car at the crowd. President Trump blamed both sides equally for the violence, despite the killing being done by the neo-Nazis. This led to further protests from Democrats and Republicans condemning Trump for having not condemned the neo-Nazis. On Wednesday, Trump issued a second statement, reading from an autocue, condemning the neo-Nazis. But as one commentator said, that was too little, too late. Then on Thursday Trump returned to condemn both sides for violence.

This really does matter. Neo-Nazism has no place in the America that is the land of the free. Racism is still an ugly and livid, living scar that cuts America. We are affected as America is supposed to be, in the first instance, the leader of the West and secondly, our greatest ally.

It is not for nothing that Theresa May has utterly condemned the violence in Charlottesville and has placed the blame firmly on the actions of the neo-Nazis, Ku Klux Klan and other white supremacists. Implicitly she has critiqued Trump. There are now calls from Conservatives and Labour for the invitation to Trump to make a State visit here to be withdrawn.

All of this matters to us. We need to hear the Gospel reading and the story of the Canaanite woman. We must hear the struggles of the Early Church and hear that for us, we can have no truck with any ideology that discriminates falsely against people on the grounds of race, gender, sexuality. Indeed, Jesus, eventually, deliberately turns to help the woman. We are called to help, young and old, black, white, male, female. For we are faithful disciples of the risen Lord. Amen.