

Gospel reflections

Matthew 15: 21-28

The Faith of a Canaanite Woman

²¹Leaving that place, Jesus withdrew to the region of Tyre and Sidon.²²A Canaanite woman from that vicinity came to him, crying out, "Lord, Son of David, have mercy on me! My daughter is demon-possessed and suffering terribly."

²³Jesus did not answer a word. So his disciples came to him and urged him, "Send her away, for she keeps crying out after us."

²⁴He answered, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel."

²⁵The woman came and knelt before him. "Lord, help me!" she said.

²⁶He replied, "It is not right to take the children's bread and toss it to the dogs."

²⁷"Yes it is, Lord," she said. "Even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table."²⁸Then Jesus said to her, "Woman, you have great faith! Your request is granted." And her daughter was healed at that moment.



The Canaanite Woman (1617) by Pieter Lastman

Like many accounts told in the Bible, the story of the Canaanite woman is carefully placed in a context that enhances its meaning. The early Seventeenth painting (above) helps to provide its context. Firstly, reading from right to left, we see the author of this Gospel, Matthew, identifiable by the large book under his arm. He looks straight at us as, telling us this is a story of importance. He

almost seems to be saying. 'Listen and learn'. Just behind him, merging into the background is a rather well-dressed man, feather in his cap. He possibly represents the Pharisees who, at the beginning of Chapter 15, had challenged Jesus because his disciples were not maintaining Jewish traditions.

From there we move into Matthew's account of the meeting with the Canaanite woman, complete with small dogs and children. She kneels, appealing to Jesus to save her daughter, while the young dogs also seem to beg on her behalf, reminding us that 'even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from the master's table'. The disciples are placed quite centrally in the picture, telling Jesus to send the woman away, something they do on other occasions such as the time parents brought their children to see Jesus. Despite spending so much time with Jesus they still don't quite understand the nature of his ministry and are a barrier between Jesus and those who seek his help.

Finally, just to the left of Jesus, we see people being brought to him to be healed, as recounted by Matthew in the verses immediately following this incident. In this way the artist portrays this whole section of Matthew's Gospel from the conflict with the pharisees and lawmakers, to the appeal for help for the woman's daughter, to the healing of others in need, regardless of who they might be.

The placement of Jesus' encounter with the Canaanite woman is between two other key events. Immediately beforehand Jesus has called out the pharisees as hypocrites (v7). He dismisses them as the blind leading the blind. (v14) They appear to be upholders of the law but Jesus sees through their behaviour. He leaves and goes to the region of Tyre and Sidon, an area that is more Greek than Jewish and also where the Canaanites live. It is there, not in Jewish heartland that the daughter of a gentile, an outsider is healed.

In contrast to the Pharisees, the Canaanite woman is an outsider in more than one way. She is a foreigner, no friend to the Jews. She is also an unaccompanied woman and she is persistent. Most significantly she is a woman of great faith. Jesus is more likely to reprimand his disciples, those who know him best, for their lack of faith but here he recognises an outsider and a woman for her great faith. We are not told how this foreign woman had heard of Jesus. What we do know is that she had such great faith that she continues to appeal to Jesus for help. She continues to appeal despite the complaints of the disciples who just want Jesus to get rid of her. They see her as a nuisance, of no account. She continues to appeal, even when it appears that Jesus is not listening to her. Still she appeals when Jesus says he was sent 'only to the lost sheep of Israel'. This tension between Jesus, the disciples and the woman is evident in their placement in the centre of the painting but it is Jesus and the woman who are in the spotlight. It is a dramatic moment, even more dramatic as the woman dares to debate with Jesus – and her great faith is rewarded.

Where in this picture would we place ourselves? Are we the pharisees believing that law and ritual are most important? Are we the disciples turning away those who are outsiders? Are we the Canaanite woman trusting with great faith?

Finally, what does this means for our schools? Do we show more respect for appearances? Are we inclusive in the way we support everyone in our schools regardless of who they are? Is our faith and trust in a compassionate Jesus shared in our communities?

Prayer: Heavenly Father, open our eyes to see you clearly and to see others as you see them. Open our hearts to feel your love so we can share is with our world. Open our hands to share your compassion with all around us and surround us always with your grace and forgiveness. Amen

Faith, Hope and Love: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TYufbfcc4vU>