**Trinity 10**

Our Gospel reading today is from Matthew 15: 21-28

The story of Jesus’ encounter with the Canaanite women is difficult and disturbing. Some have seen Jesus’ initial refusal to help the woman as heartless, even racist. He says he has come for the people of Israel, his own people, not hers. In our day perhaps her response would be to say that Canaanite lives matter. And in a sense that is exactly what she does do.

Some writers have tried to soften the insult. Jesus calls her people dogs, which is always a terrible insult in any culture. So they say he was teasing her, using the word for puppies, no offence meant. I’m not sure that really makes things any better though.

As ever context is important, Jesus had withdrawn to Tyre and Sidon, a foreign district, to get away from the crowds. Matthew has already told us about the feeding of the five thousand after which people thought Jesus was amazing, free food, Jesus for President. The setting for the story of the walking on the water begins with Jesus needing to withdraw, to find a bit of space away from the crowd and their demands.

So he goes to foreign territory, and even here he is recognised and pestered. The point is that the woman recognises Jesus. She knows who he is, she believes he can make a difference. But surely God’s best promises are for the people of Israel, not foreigners? Us rather than them. There’s a dilemma we recognise all too well. Our own country is ramping up the defences to keep migrants of our shores. Jesus faces a question which is relevant to every generation in every society.

We know in his day many people weren’t counted as people. The feeding of the five thousand for example, as it is always called, wasn’t just five thousand. Matthew tells us it was five thousand men, besides women and children. The latter weren’t counted.

And in Matthew’s Gospel just after this meeting with the Canaanite woman comes another feeding, four thousand this time, fed with just seven loaves and few small fish. Yet seven baskets of leftover were collected.

The woman isn’t asking for the meal, she’s only after some crumbs. She recognises that when it comes to hope and love and the power to heal there’s more than enough to go round. And when that happens there is always plenty to spare. It’s a question of how we respond to the other’s need. Whether our instinct is to protect the little we think we have, or to see the plenty there is to share.

We overlook that Matthew refers to the woman as a Canaanite. That was an old term, the land of Canaan was no longer on the map, the Canaanites had been the old enemy. Matthew is deliberately identifying the woman as the last person on earth a Jew would try to help. Some have suggested even Jesus himself was converted, a Jewish man learning to listen to a Canaanite woman and in her find faith.

Well who knows? Sometimes I think we can try to make these things too neat and tidy, things are simpler that way. But life is rarely simple. I hope Matthew was making the point I suggested last week, that miracles are not things that happened, they are things which happen. Matthew tells the story of Jesus for the people of his own day, trying to figure out if God’s best hopes are for themselves, or for a whole lot of other people, most of whom are not like us.

We know that the cost of this pandemic will leave deep scars. Those who have lost people they love. Those who have seen businesses go under. Those who have been made redundant. The physical, emotional, spiritual and economic costs will be huge. There will be times when it will seem easier to not listen to the voice of the outsider, or the stranger, or the person not like us. The story of Jesus’ encounter with the Canaanite woman is difficult and disturbing. I suspect the world we shape after this might be better and kinder if we are ready to engage with the difficult and disturbing.

Paul Dawson