

## Bennochy sermon 14<sup>th</sup> August 2011

We have all been shocked by the scale of the violence of the riots in England. One of the outcomes is the ongoing debate about the link between poverty, being disadvantaged and criminality. If there is a link, there can be no excuse, surely no one condones such actions, but some of the perpetrators did not come from such backgrounds. As all night courts have been sitting all sorts of people have been charged. Having said that, I suspect that our initial perception was of a certain group of people carrying out these attacks, probably young black males, and our response being to distance ourselves from these people. They are not like us. We struggle to understand why they would do what they did, and their culture, background and upbringing is alien to ours. A Canaanite woman comes to Jesus in a state of desperate need, her daughter is seriously ill. Jews have nothing to do with Canaanites.

The whole of Matthew 15 is about what was considered clean and unclean under the Jewish law and Jesus gives the Pharisees a real hard time over it. He quotes Isaiah, who condemns tradition over the law of God. (v 8-9) It is so easy to get locked into tradition! Whether it is hand washing or what they were allowed to eat under the law, Jesus clearly states, and it was controversial for its time, what is important is not what goes into the body, but what comes out. That is what makes you unclean. What comes out of our mouth and our hearts and our actions, these things declare our relationship with God. See verse 19- 20.

For Jesus to get to Caesarea Philippi, he has to travel north from Galilee through an area known as Phoenicia where the cities of Tyre and Sidon were. As he journeys he encounters this Canaanite woman, the Canaanites probably driven north by the original invasion of the Promised Land under Joshua.

How this fits into the chapter is that she is considered unclean by the Jews. This is an encounter of two different cultures. "Son of God, have mercy on me, my daughter has a demon and is in a terrible condition". She will have heard about the healing miracles of this carpenter from Nazareth, but what draws her here is a mother's desire for her child to be healed. We can understand that. There is recognition of who Jesus is and what she thinks he can do for her daughter. If we had not known the end of the story, I suspect we would have put a bet on Jesus immediately healing the daughter. He did not. In fact he said nothing and the initial hearers would have been pleased with this. Backed up by the disciples who wanted rid of this noisy woman. It got better; he reinforced his initial rejection of her pleading, see v 24. Good on you Jesus, the crowd might have said, we are against Canaanites, Samaritans, racist to a man.

For the Jews, the covenant with God was only with them as a nation, no one else. They were clean, everyone else was unclean. I wonder if Jesus in some way accepted the limitations of his earthly ministry, to the Jews first, until it had been rejected by them. Is this incident a small spark from the man prophesied to be the 'light to the nations'? I don't know, but this rejection does seem to us out of character. And there had been other precedents, the Roman officer's servant. (Matthew 8: 5-13)

It is not looking good for this woman and her daughter, but she persists. Out of desperation she perseveres. Is that not a sign of faith? I like to think that there is something deep within her that believes this man can heal her daughter. Are there not times when we are desperate and we come to God armed only with our faith, no matter how small that is. We are in so many ways no different from this woman.

Jesus responds with words that today we would consider racist. He says, you are a pariah dog feeding on refuse. The listeners rejoice, for Jesus is saying that Israel is the children of God. Why God choose Israel is one of

the many mysteries of God. It is true, that is what scripture says, and the Canaanite woman agrees. She recognises what has been said about Jesus and accepts all the points Jesus has made. She would make a good negotiator, for she uses that agreement to make her own point. See verse 27.

Then the shocking thing happens, Jesus declares her a woman of faith and her daughter is healed, you can almost hear the sharp intake of breath, maybe from the disciples, possibly from the listeners to this story. Jesus how can you say that!

The crumb is thrown and received by this woman. We are that woman. We are not of Israel. Yet we come in faith to Jesus. This is a parable of what was to come, no longer Gods' love for just one people of God, Israel, but God's love for all. For God, there is no such thing as the unlovable. Amen.