

Jesus and people of other faiths (4)

Mark 7:24-30

²⁴Jesus left that place and went to the vicinity of Tyre. He entered a house and did not want anyone to know it; yet he could not keep his presence secret. ²⁵In fact, as soon as she heard about him, a woman whose little daughter was possessed by an evil spirit came and fell at his feet. ²⁶The woman was a Greek, born in Syrian Phoenicia. She begged Jesus to drive the demon out of her daughter.

²⁷"First let the children eat all they want," he told her, "for it is not right to take the children's bread and toss it to their dogs."

²⁸"Yes, Lord," she replied, "but even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs."

²⁹Then he told her, "For such a reply, you may go; the demon has left your daughter."

³⁰She went home and found her child lying on the bed, and the demon gone.

4. Jesus and the Canaanite (Syro-Phoenician) woman

'The Canaanites were in the land' says scripture of the place promised to the Israelites by God. Palestine already had its settled tribes that farmed the land, built walled cities developed both trade and technology back in the iron age, while Israel was still nomadic. Mosaic law contains some prohibitions about the manufacture and use of iron. Only flint knives for instance, were used in circumcision ritual, binding God's people to their stone age past, defying new technology involving fierce fires and melting stone, which both promised and delivered so much in the hands of these town dwellers who controlled the territory Israel believed itself heaven sent to occupy. At first they feared and resented the sophisticated people they encountered in Canaan, until they built confidence to confront and defeat them in battle.

Some of these native inhabitants were coastal people who built boats who sailed the seas that desert people dreaded and regarded as representing chaos. Their original prosperity, won from the land, meant they relied on the weather, and put their trust in the mountain gods, whose thunder heralded precious life giving rain, and fertility goddesses of the soil. Their lives were more complex than those of the Hebrew nomads who drifted into the region and ended up occupying, then conquering neighbours who to start with had been more resourceful than themselves. What they had more of than their neighbours was moral and spiritual bonding under the law, giving them strength in adversity, not to mention an aggressive streak and fighting spirit!

By the time of Jesus, they had learned to live and let live. They had all been laid low by invaders many times over, and were now colonised by Imperial Rome. While economic life was regulated by the Empire, they were left to their own devices at a cultural, social and religious level. Greek has been the language of the Empire for three hundred years. Jews for whom Hebrew was their foundation language, conversed daily in its derivative language Aramaic. The Phoenicians and the Philistines and many other ancient tribal groups we know less well had their own indigenous language, culture and religion. Greek was used for trade, and communicating across cultures, with the occupying forces and between tribes. The Greek Empire had been influential on all these older cultures

Greek gods, practices of magic and divination, love of sport and exaltation of bodily sensuality, all resonated with the earthy spiritual traditions of Canaanite tribal religion. Jews across the Empire spoke Greek, were steeped in Greek philosophy, and translated the Torah into Greek down in Egypt. Palestinian Jews, however, resented the erosion of their religion and culture by Hellenism. 160 years before Jesus, it led to a violent reaction against Greek colonialism, and the revolt of Judas Maccabeus. This returned Palestine to Jewish independent rule for a while at least. But when defeated, the Jews more than ever turned in on themselves. They isolated themselves from neighbouring Gentiles in a 'live and let live' way, making no secret of the contempt with which they regarded non-Jews. This was rooted in a fear and hatred of their fellow occupants of the land going back at least a thousand years. It wasn't like the Brits and the French. It was serious. Avoidance of contact, no inter-marriage. Each kept to their own community. If expediency obliged them to occupy the same town for trade or security reasons, they occupied their own areas rather than mix.

There always were different strands within Judaism. The violent militant revolutionaries, the zealots, self-styled successors of Judas Maccabeus. Pious radical isolationists, some Pharisees and the Essene sect. Sadducees were a conservative ruling establishment, who learned compromise, doing deals with the Romans to preserve their best interests. Then there was the poor of the land – Jews dispossessed by misfortune, forced into bonded labour, or earning a living in trades others considered unclean – tanners, midwives, surgeons, iron forgers, prostitutes. These bridged the gap between Jewish religious elites and Gentiles. Not as formal as the Hindu caste system, but not too dissimilar in effect.

The Canaanite woman's story appears in both Mark and Matthew's Gospel. It's an incident which occurs during Jesus' visit to the coastal cities of Tyre and Sidon. She is also described as the Syro-Phoenician woman. The word Canaan, means land of purple, the name first used for ancient Palestine and Syria. Canaan was a main source of red-purple dyed goods. The Greeks used their word *phoinix*, meaning red-purple, when referring to the people who traded these red-purple goods to them. Phoenicia, eventually became the name of Canaan's coastal strip.

The woman comes to Jesus, begging him for help. Her daughter is mentally

disturbed. She reads this as demon possession, in keeping with the beliefs of religion and culture. Normally such an approach to a Jew would not have been worth the risk of public rejection and humiliation, for that was how public relations between people of different faiths was handled. And at first it sounds as if Jesus is going in the same direction, asserting that his mission is to the lost sheep of the house of Israel, and that it would not be right to throw the children's food to the dogs. Dogs were regarded by Jews as unclean animals. No doubt a commonplace enough insult.

However, the woman has the confidence to answer back wittily. She is not cowed by humiliation. She knows she has nothing to lose if she reaches out on behalf of her child, and everything worth gaining if she is successful. Did Jesus' healing reputation go before him? Her Greek influenced Canaanite religion would place great confidence in wonderworkers, healers, healing shrines. For her to accept her unworthiness and call for crumbs like a dog was an expression, not only of humility but of the kind of honour and respect she might have given to any reputed healer. Her request is instantly granted. Jesus remarks on her faith, her willingness to trust in the possibility of healing - so much greater a life giving power than the resignation and fatalism which features in so much religion – even Christianity.

Jesus starts by voicing the official Jewish party line but appears to change his attitude as he talks with her. Is he teaching the disciples a surprising lesson by playing up to their prejudices, then turning it all around to reveal what faith consists of? Or, is he actually learning something new about someone of another faith here? We can argue that surely the Son of God doesn't need to learn, does he? Or we can argue that unless he learns from experiencing the faith of another he isn't fully human, like us. In learning, in changing his attitude from his listening, he is setting the tone for our encounter with others different from us – those we are conditioned to think of as scary, or contemptible. Even if we believe we have the total fullness of truth in our faith, there must always be room to learn something new where we least expect it if we are to follow the way of Jesus. He knew and we too should know. God is greater than all religion can tell of Him.