

## Sermon by the Rev Susan Gill for Sunday 20 August 2023

“Methinks the lady doth protest too much!”

Matthew 15:21-28

"The lady doth protest too much, methinks" is a line from Shakespeare's Hamlet. Queen Gertrude responds to the insincere overacting of a character in the play within a play by Prince Hamlet. The actor's portrayal of love and fidelity are way over the top; hence Queen Gertrude's reaction.

Now this quote has been taken out of context too often.

Nevertheless as we turn to the Gospel story I want to say “Methinks Jesus doth protest too much”. I think his apparent rudeness to this woman is hiding something else.

Stay with me a moment. Don't brand me a heretic just yet.

There's no way around the story if we are to look at face value at the events. Jesus, and Matthew too) appears to insult the woman who comes asking for help. If I were in charge of Jesus' PR, I wouldn't want this story made public. It's not very flattering, is it?

Mark writes that the woman was a Gentile, born in Syrian Phoenicia. But in the Matthew version she is called a Canaanite woman. At that time in Jewish/Roman history, the Canaanites as a people group, ie the former enemies of Israel, no longer existed!

Matthew's connection between the identification of the woman as a Canaanite and Jesus' apparent comparison of her to a dog is clearly intentional.

Matthew's Gospel is probably addressed to Jewish Christians. An important part of his message is that the Kingdom of Heaven, God's new way of being in this earth and beyond, is open to everyone.

That message is one the prophets tried to get across time and time again.

It is also the message that Paul is relaying in his letter to those in the church at Rome. We often read that letter as if it were about individual salvation, but it is about a people being transformed into the likeness of Jesus. His letter addresses how a disparate group of individuals are now to live as one people in Christ.

It is important to note too, that Matthew places this story, immediately after another interaction between Jesus and the religious lot. Some Pharisees and teachers of religious get on Jesus' case about how he and his followers disobey the age-old tradition of ceremonial hand washing before they eat.

That this story about Jesus and the woman follows the incident of religious nitpicking; of exclusion is no accident.

Let's just pause here. What do you know about the character of Jesus? How have you experienced him?

Well, if there was one man that women should consider to be our greatest ally and champion, that man would be Jesus right?

So how come Jesus apparently rebuffs this woman three times. The first time he ignores her, the second time to tell her that she is none of his concern and the third time to dismiss her with a racial slur ('It isn't right to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs').

But Jesus' third "no" to the woman is not the end of this story.

We have Jesus' words recorded but we can't hear his tone of voice nor see his facial expression. We can't read his body language.

Given that communication is approximately 55% nonverbal, 38% vocal, and 7% words only, we only have 7% of the story.

Some theologians say that when this woman's great faith finally gets his attention, Jesus is the one who is transformed by the encounter. Hmmm, it's a possibility.

I wonder if there is another lens through which we could look at Jesus' interaction with her. That lens for me, is what I know of Jesus; how I have experienced him in my own walk of faith and in the Bible.

In Scripture Jesus always stuck up for the underdog, pun intended. I have never encountered him as mean or prejudiced but always loving and always inclusive. I have never experienced Jesus as shutting anyone out.

So perhaps Jesus was a lot more welcoming in this event, than it seems at first. Yes there was a point to be made. Yes Jesus came to a specific people group, the Jews, in the first instance. But perhaps even in that, Jesus tone was more playful than at first appears. Perhaps Jesus wasn't being ultra mean to the woman but just wanted to find out where she was at. Would she persevere or chicken out?

The word for 'dog' some say, means puppy. Perhaps not, but it does indicate a house dog, a tame domestic animal – not an enemy. And the root of that word is linked to the word for kneeling before Jesus; for her worship.

Perhaps Jesus is doing some kind of word play that goes over our heads.

Certainly Jesus is discussing theology with this woman.

And the word translated as “woman” or ‘dear woman’ is more like “Oh”. It was used for addressing someone when the speaker was profoundly moved. That word expresses the speaker's deep emotion.

When Jesus sees her deep faith, her perseverance, he responds in love. Her includes her and her daughter in his healing ministry. He offers true hospitality to this woman that many would deem an outsider.

The story is followed by Jesus healing many people and feeding 4000.

The story and it's context leads me to believe that Jesus was not being rude but, in spite of appearances. He was in fact operating in a mode that challenged gently, not just the woman but those around her.

I think Jesus protested too much to be taken at face value and was in fact, offering the generous, inclusive love to this outsider whom his followers wanted to reject on the basis of her race. And the reason I chose this picture? It takes a lighter view of the whole situation, while still offering a welcome - just as I believe Jesus did.

If you still, think me a heretic, that's fine.

Let's pause again and ask ourselves a question, or allow the Holy Spirit to ask us a question or two:

Is there anyone in our lives that we are excluding on the basis of their race, or their difference to us?

Pause

How might we show the kind of radical inclusion and hospitality that Jesus showed to the woman?