Jesus for Outsiders
Matthew 15:21-39

In many of our big cities, if you want a decent Chinese meal, you go to Chinatown, or if you want the best pasta in town, you go to the Italian quarter. And our cities can have these clusters, or enclaves, of people from the same ethnic background, all choosing to live in the same area of a city. Well, in Jesus' day it wasn't ethnic quarter that differed from ethnic quarter within a city, whole cities and regions differed ethnically from one another. And when Matthew tells us, v21, that 'Jesus went away from there and withdrew to the district of Tyre and Sidon', he's telling us something that should make our ears prick up. Because Tyre and Sidon, and their surrounding region, were gentile, non-Jewish areas. In other words, Jesus has just walked into pagan or enemy territory. He's crossed the border into an area Jewish people considered unclean.

Unexpected Faith

Now, do you feel like an insider or an outsider? Do you feel like you're in, and on the pitch playing, or that you're sat on the side-lines watching? Do you feel like you belong, or you don't? It probably depends entirely on the situation, doesn't it? I mean, maybe if you're an expat here, at work you probably feel totally in, you're in your element, but in your neighbourhood, or at the shops, if people start talking to you in French, you feel a total outsider.

Well, the same was true for this woman who comes to Jesus. Verse 22, 'And behold, a Canaanite woman from that region came out and was crying, "Have mercy on me, O Lord, Son of David." She's in her home area, she's from these parts, she belongs here, she's an insider, but when it comes to faith, when it comes to things to do with God, she was a total outsider. Matthew calls her – not just a gentile, but a Canaanite. And the Canaanites were the ancient enemies of Israel. They were the people who in the Old Testament, Joshua and the people of Israel had been told to conquer, and whose land they had been told to take possession of because their sins and religious practices were so grotesque. Not only that but it was those same religious practices, and the Canaanite idols, that had led the people of Israel into idolatry, and that had resulted in them being sent into exile from the Promised Land 500 years previously. It was their negative influence on the Jewish people that led to all those additional rules we looked at last week, like handwashing, to keep the people pure of unclean things and unclean people, just like this woman.

But then again, this woman's not just a Canaanite, is she? She's a Canaanite *woman*. So she's pagan, she's unclean, and she's a woman, which means to the Jewish mindset, she's the ultimate outsider. She is the last person you'd expect to come to Jesus.

Now, what's that got to do with you and me? Well, firstly, maybe you were brought up going to church, and there's nothing strange you being here on a Sunday morning - in someways this is like home territory for you, you feel like an insider. But maybe, for others of us that's not the case. And you can't quite believe

you're here – and a few years or months or weeks back you could never have imagined being here, because when it comes to faith, you recognise that you're like this woman, that you're an outsider. But secondly, like her, the vast majority of us are gentiles – outsiders to the God of Israel. And so in many ways, whether you feel an insider or an outsider to faith, this woman represents all of us here in the story.

Now, before we look at why she's here, look at how she addresses Jesus: "O Lord, Son of David." Now, she's probably not calling him Lord in the full sense of that word, it's probably more a title of respect. But when she calls him Son of David, there's no question she's making a statement – that she knows, in some measure, who he is – that he's the promised Son of Israel's greatest king, that he's the Jewish Messiah.

And compare that to the attitude we saw last week from Israel's religious leaders. They came criticising Jesus. The very people who should have been in the team playing, the very people you would have thought were insiders, rejected Jesus, and yet here is a woman who you'd least expect recognising who he is. So sure you might feel an outsider, and a few weeks, or months, or years back, you'd never have predicted you'd be in church – that would just be weird, but like her, do you begin to recognise who Jesus is? Because ultimately, the Christian faith isn't about you, or me, and who we are, or what our background is, it's about him.

But then look why she's come. Verse 22 again, "Have mercy on me, O Lord, Son of David; my daughter is severely oppressed by a demon." So she knows she needs mercy, she knows she needs help – and not so much for herself, but for her daughter, whose life is being wrecked by the powers of darkness. So this woman is facing an issue that she knows she can't turn around on her own. An issue that's totally outside of her power - where she knows she needs a power from outside of her to intervene.

But do you know what's surprising? It's that she comes to Jesus at all. You see, apparently just up the road was a temple to the god Eshmun – the pagan god of healing. So why hasn't she taken her daughter there? Why has she come to Jesus instead? Well, maybe she's tried Eshmun and it's made no difference. Or maybe she knew better than to do that. Whichever it is, we're not told. But like her, whether you're exploring the Christian faith or you're an established Christian, everyone of us comes with needs, don't we? Maybe it's your own needs, or like her, there's an issue in your family, or with someone you love. And where do you go with that? Because there are alternatives to Jesus aren't there?

You could just try to get through this on your own – yet deep down, you know you lack the resources. Or you could turn to other religions, but there it always seems like you have to drive a bargain with their god – you've got to shape up, or give in someway to earn his mercy. But mercy isn't mercy if you have to earn it, is it? And like this woman you know you need mercy not your just desserts. Or maybe to help you cope you

turn to something that helps you numb the pain in someway, that dampens your fears, and you self-medicate. But in the end they leave you worse off than you were before.

And so this most unlikely person, this Canaanite woman, this outsider, comes to Jesus, the Jewish Messiah, because she knows that it's with him that she'll find mercy. Except at first it doesn't quite go like that, does it?

Persistent Faith

Verse 23, 'But he did not answer her a word.' Now, how do you respond when someone doesn't answer your email or text you back immediately? And it's worse with Whatsapp, isn't it, because then you know they've seen it!: 'Why doesn't she respond? This is so frustrating!'

And this woman comes to Jesus, pleading for her daughter whose life is being wrecked and Jesus is… silent. And the silence of God can be one of the most disconcerting things when it comes to faith, can't it? When you pray and nothing seems to happen, or nothing seems to change, and all your words are met with is this deafening silence.

And yet, it's not because Jesus hasn't heard, is it? He clearly has. So why doesn't he answer her?

Well, he does answer her – eventually, and for her ultimately it's a 'yes', just as sometimes for us it will be a 'yes'. And sometimes a 'no'. And sometimes a 'not yet'. But why the unnerving silence first? Why the delay in answering? Why those times when it feels like God is keeping you hanging there, seemingly unresponsive? Well, this woman's experience and her response teach us two reasons why God might use silence as a training ground for faith. And the first is humility.

You see, in Jesus' silence it seems the woman keeps on asking and crying out after Jesus, and that unnerves the disciples, v23, 'And his disciples came and begged him, saying, "Send her away, for she is crying out after us." Now, it's not clear whether they want Jesus to dismiss her out of hand because she's a gentile woman, or whether they want him to give her what she wants so they can get rid of her and her noise, because she's making a scene. Either way, Jesus says, v24, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." So Christ has come as a shepherd to bring back into his flock everyone who has wandered off. But that begins first with the people of Israel, and she's not one of them. She's an outsider.

So she falls at his feet v25, 'She came and knelt before him' she assumes the position of someone pleading for something from someone greater and more powerful than her and says, "Lord, help me." She knows he's above her in every way, and she humbles herself in action and in word. And Jesus' response? Verse 26 "It is not right to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs."

Now, we've heard a lot in the press recently about which powerful person used what racist term. But here there's no doubt what Jesus said, is there, and the word *dog* was a standard Jewish insult for gentiles. And dogs were seen as unclean, wild scavengers. So is Jesus insulting her? 'I'm not going to give you, a gentile, what only Jews can have, you're just a dog.' Well, that hardly fits the Jesus of the Bible, and it certainly doesn't fit how he treats her in a moment's time. So why does he say this? Well, some people suggest he's using the word for a pet dog, and it's more affectionate than it sounds. But that doesn't really hold water, because she'd still be a dog. More likely Jesus is simply telling her how it is, 'this is how you're seen in the eyes of Jewish people, you're an outsider, you're unclean, and at this point in God's salvation plan, I'm sent to the Jews.' And if that's the case then he's doing this to draw her out further. Because look how she responds.

And it's not with anger. She doesn't say, how dare you call me a dog! Verse 27, "Yes, Lord, yet even dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table." Now, when you've got kids, under the dining table is not somewhere you want to go, is it? I mean people might say of someone's house, 'it's so clean, you can eat off the floor!' Well, when the girls were younger… or not so young… you could eat off the floor at our house too, in fact you could eat a feast off our floor!

And she's saying, 'Lord, if I am a dog, then at least let me eat the crumbs under the table like a dog would.' 'I know I don't deserve to eat at Messiah's table, I know I'm an outsider, I know I'm undeserving, I know I deserve nothing from you, but that's why I'm coming to you for mercy – for you to treat me better than I deserve to be treated, because even dogs get the crumbs, and the crumbs from your table could heal my daughter.' You see, she knows that what she's asking of him is his unmerited, undeserved favour for an outsider, but that's exactly what she needs.

And it's in the silence that that kind of humility grows – because it brings us to the end of ourselves. You see, if you're self-sufficient, you don't need Jesus to come through for you, do you? His silence doesn't matter for you, you can sort it yourself. Until you can't. Until that crisis comes when neither you, nor your money, nor your contacts can sort it. And then, in the silence, we realise that we're totally dependent on him speaking and breaking the silence – that he's the Lord, not us - that it's only God who can save us; and it's only God who can turn this situation around; it's only God who can give us the strength to cope.

And the waiting brings that home to us – Jesus, it's you I need. And that knowledge that we deserve nothing from him, that we have no claim on him, that we're lost unless he speaks, intensifies in the silence, and teaches us the humility that has power with God. As God said through Isaiah the prophet, "This is the one to whom I will look: he who is humble and contrite in spirit and trembles at my word." (Is 66:2).

And this Canaanite woman's response has become a model prayer that churches have used down the ages before taking communion: "We do not presume to come to this thy table, merciful Lord, trusting in our own righteousness, but in thy manifold and great mercies. We are not worthy so much as to gather up the crumbs under thy table. But thou are the same Lord whose nature is always to have mercy…" And it's before that merciful Lord that she humbles herself.

But it's not just humility that God's silence teaches us – it's perseverance. Naomi our eldest daughter is doing Sports Science at uni, and as part of that she's had to learn the high jump, which is hard when you're not exactly high. But to quote Shakespeare, 'though she is little, she is fierce', and to get better, the bar keeps on going up. And in seeming to push this woman away, the Lord pulls her further and further in. And the more Jesus pushes back, the more she comes back. You see, it's only by not getting what we want when we want it that perseverance, and with it character, can grow. It's only by silence that our ear can grow more sensitive to his voice. It's only by increasing our distance that our stamina can grow. And this woman simply will not take no for an answer.

And it's that persistent, persevering, and yet humble faith, that Jesus responds to. Verse 28, "O woman, great is your faith! Be it done for you as you desire." And her daughter was healed instantly.' She comes to Jesus asking for grace, for mercy, knowing that she will find it nowhere else. She comes knowing that she cannot do this, only he can do it. She comes humbly knowing she deserves nothing. And she gets the grace and mercy she needs and her daughter's life is transformed. And more than that even, she gets Jesus commendation with it. And she becomes a forerunner for all of us outsiders that it's Jesus we need, and he will not send us away.

The Compassion of Christ

And Jesus leaves this remarkable woman behind and walks along the coast of the sea of Galilee. And he's still in gentile territory and Matthew says v30, 'Great crowds came to him, bringing the lame, the blind, the crippled, the mute, and many others, and they put them at his feet.' So just like the woman who knelt at his feet, now the broken of society, all those whom life would pass by, all whom others would look down on and pity, all those who people would thank the gods they were not like, were brought to his feet and he heals them. And Matthew says, 'when they saw the mute speaking, the crippled healthy, the lame walking, and the blind seeing… they glorified the God of Israel' (v31). None of their gods could do this. None of their gods could make them and their loved ones whole like this – but the God of Israel – in Jesus of Nazareth - he could do it.

You see, whilst you and I may not be physically broken like the people the crowd brings, in our inner lives it might be a different story. We bear scars and hurts from the past. We can feel enslaved and trapped in our behaviours – and we can't seem to get free from them. We bear the consequences for stupid choices we've

made. And physically we might be fit and well, but emotionally and spiritually we can be as broken on the inside as they were on the outside. And when you realise that, to which god do you go? As we've seen, the gods of other religions demand more from you – and if you can't achieve that you feel worse off than before because now you know you're a failure. Or, if you can do all they ask you become more proud and self-satisfied, better than others who can't. And that's no path to inner wholeness, is it? Or you pursue the secular path of expressive individualism. But as we saw last week – if the problem's inside us, just expressing more of 'us' will never make anything whole.

Instead, like the woman, and like the crowd, it's Christ that we need. Verse 32, 'Jesus called his disciples to him and said, "I have compassion on the crowd because they have been with me now three days and have nothing to eat. And I am unwilling to send them away hungry, lest they faint on the way."

Now, in his gospel Mark tells us this happened in the area of the Decapolis – ten independently-governed Greek and gentile cities in the region of Transjordan. So what Jesus did for the 5000-plus Jewish crowd, back in chapter 14, he's about to do for 4000-plus gentile outsiders. And he's about to feed them. But did you notice why? Because he knows they're hungry. Because he knows that if he sends them away in this desert area some of them at least won't make it – they'll faint. Because he has compassion on them.

You know, there is something incredibly comforting in knowing that the God of the universe knows that you are dust. That he knows you're weak, that he knows you're faint, that he knows you're broken. And that he doesn't leave you to wander off, dependent on your own resources, and fall on your face. He knows just how much each of us can take. You see, we tend to think that wellbeing and human thriving comes in asserting ourselves and pushing ourselves to the top, and taking control and being our own god. But that just results in ever more anxiety and inner turmoil. Because we were never made to bear the weight of God. Instead the gospel says wholeness comes from humbling ourselves, and recognising we are creatures and he's the Creator. That we're weak and he's strong. And it's only he who can feed us with the bread we really need.

And here Jesus takes what little the disciples had to offer – seven loaves and a few fish and fed thousands, v 37, 'and they all ate and were satisfied.' But the night before he was betrayed he took another loaf and broke it and said, 'This is my body given for you.' And at the cross he took upon himself the wrath of God for all those times when we've tried to be our own god, and he was broken that we might be made whole. He was emptied that we might be satisfied. And he was cast out from God's presence, as he cried out from the cross, 'My God, My God why have you forsaken me', as God the Father turned his face away. And there, in the darkness, Jesus became the ultimate outsider, so that you might be welcomed in – not as a dog under the table eating the crumbs, but to sit and feast at Messiah's table in the light, as a beloved son or daughter.

And when you know that he has welcomed you, undeserving though you are; when you know that you're an outsider, and he's accepted you, or you're the broken and he's made you whole, or you're the hungry and he's fed you, it will transform your attitude to those around you who are still outside or whose lives are broken, or who are hungry for life and love and meaning. And the world can never give you that. Because it can never give you a deep love for those who are different from you, or disagree with you, or who make choices you don't agree with. Only experiencing the compassion of Christ for yourself can ever change your heart like that. And thank God it does.