



A CURIOUS CURE?

Leaving that place, Jesus withdrew to the region of Tyre and Sidon. He entered a house and did not want anyone to know it; yet he could not keep his presence secret. In fact, as soon as she heard about him a Canaanite woman from that vicinity came to him, crying out, "Lord, Son of David, have mercy on me! My daughter is suffering terribly from demon-possession."

Jesus did not answer a word. So his disciples came to him and urged him, "Send her away, for she keeps crying out after us." He answered, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel."

The woman came and knelt before him. "Lord, help me!" she said. He replied, "It is not right to take the children's bread and toss it to their dogs."

"Yes, Lord," she said, "but even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table."

Then Jesus answered, "Woman, you have great faith! Your request is granted." And her daughter was healed from that very hour.

Matthew 15:21-28; Mark 7:24-30

The setting of this encounter is Lebanon, which was under the joint control of Rome and Syria; Jesus was able to stay with some Jews who lived there. He had gone away from Israel for a break but even so word got around, and this woman managed to push her way in.

Preachers use this story to talk about the 'great faith' of this woman. However, most hurriedly skate over Jesus' extraordinary and apparently inexplicable behaviour, which at first (and even second) sight comes across as being dismissive, dishonest and insulting - uniquely so of the 23 recorded healings. So why did he treat this woman in such an out-of-character way?

Was he annoyed about having had his holiday disturbed? Was he grumpy after a bad night's sleep? Had some local kebabs disagreed with him? Before seeking a better explanation, let us acknowledge the difficulties:

Firstly, Jesus initially completely ignored her. But this contrasts starkly with the welcome he offered the Samaritan woman even though this too was socially taboo.¹

Secondly, he misled her by suggesting that Gentiles were not in his game plan. But this contrasts with what he already knew² and had proclaimed in his home synagogue - where he actually

specified Sidon and Syria³ - and it also contrasts with his ready welcome to the Gentile centurion.⁴

Thirdly, he effectively called her 'a dog', a common term that Jews used for Gentiles. But this contrasts with the attention, honour and compassion (remarkably anti-cultural) that Jesus displayed to women on every other occasion.

How do we explain this? It is important to realise that Jesus quickly saw that this woman was desperate and had no intention of taking 'No' for an answer. He certainly would not have behaved this way towards a shy and deferential woman who might have run away at the first sign of being unwelcome.

It is often forgotten that this incident did not involve only Jesus and the woman - *the disciples were there too*. They had previously shown their prejudices against women⁵ and the disabled,⁶ and now their hostile views of Gentiles were clearly shown when they tried to get rid of this foreigner; their attitudes reflected their Jewish upbringing, culture and theology. By behaving as he did, Jesus clearly and forcefully reflected back to them their own ungodly prejudices, exposing the way that they would have behaved (and as the woman must have anticipated). When Jesus does speak words of healing there is no reluctance but rather a celebration of her having sought him out. Indeed we can imagine that, having quickly assessed her personality, Jesus looked at her and spoke with her in a quizzical way, to encourage her to continue with her pleas; and it is very possible that he was laughing along with her by the end.

In our consultations it is very easy for our approach to be immediately coloured by prejudice. This might be related to race, class, employment status, appearance; it might include alcoholics, refugees, drug addicts, smokers, homosexuals, the obese, unmarried mothers and so on. We need to search our hearts and minds to recognise and acknowledge our own biases, lest we (like the disciples) treat the patient as less than human.

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references

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| 1. John 4:7, 27 | 3. Luke 4:16-27 | 5. John 4:27 |
| 2. Isaiah 42:6 | 4. Mark 8:5-13 | 6. John 9:2 |