

Even the Dogs...

Trinity XI, 16th August 2026

Matthew 15:21-28; Rom.11:1-2a; 29-32; Is.56:1,6-8

I think, but I'm not quite sure, that the first sermon I ever preached was on that Gospel story. The story of the Canaanite woman, who wanted Jesus to heal her daughter, and how Jesus said no. Or at any rate, how Jesus was reluctant, and had to be debated into it.

I was all of about nineteen years old, a first year theology student. I did what lots of preachers do, and said ah: well, here we see Jesus really learning something. Here we see Jesus starting out as a typical first century Jew, only really interested in the Jews, and thinking God was like that too. Thinking of the Gentiles as dogs, not really worthy of concern. Frankly, a little bit prejudiced, even racist. And then, this encounter with an actual Gentile, in real distress and need, forces him to grow up, to be open minded and open-handed, to treat everyone, everyone, just the same, as the beloved children of God. And that, I said, is the lesson for us today – grow up out of your prejudices, whatever they are, and just meet the need in front of you.

My college chaplain, because he was a kind man and I was just starting, said it was a good sermon.

My friends, he was wrong. It was terrible.

It was terrible for two linked reasons. Number one, it is basic, basic Christian teaching that Jesus Christ is God made man. That he is what you get when you translate God into human. That whoever has seen him, as St. John says, has seen the Father. He's not someone who teaches *about* God, He *is* God. Well, it follows that He wasn't racist. Just as much as that he wasn't greedy, nasty, mean, lying, bullying or vindictive or all the other things we mean by sin – in Him. God doesn't sin. As the Bible says, in Him there is no darkness at all. The same is true of God-made-flesh. In Jesus Christ, there was no darkness at all; he was not a racist.

Which we can see from reason number two: already in the Gospels we've seen Jesus, again and again, embracing and loving the person right in front of him, whatever their background. He's healed and welcomed all sorts of people prejudice might not have done: the tax collector, the prostitute, the leper and yes, also the Gentiles. Earlier in Matthew, he healed the centurion's servant – probably a Gentile, and he held that centurion – *definitely* a Gentile – up as the very model of faith. 'In no-one in Israel have I found such faith.' (8:10). This is not someone who thinks that Jews are better than everyone else.

So whatever today's story is about, it's *not* about Jesus learning not to be a bigot.

What is it about?

The key is in those words Jesus says: I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.

What that means is that Jesus considered his mission, first and foremost, to be aimed at Israel. Not because God was only interested in Israel, or loved the Jews more than anyone else. Some might have thought that, some certainly did think it. But there's another way of looking at it, which is to say: God chose Israel precisely to save the world. God chose Israel to be his messenger, his light to the nations, his invitation to the world. God wanted the world to look at Israel, and want to join in – that's what's our Old Testament reading today from Isaiah 61 was all about. *The foreigners who join themselves to the Lord I will bring to my holy mountain, and make them joyful in my house of prayer...*

Jesus is focused on Israel, because God was focused on Israel: focused on Israel for the sake of the world. It goes right back to the first promise to Abraham, at the very beginning of the chosen people: *I will bless you, says God, and in you shall all the families of the earth be blessed*. And our reading from Paul says that God never changed his mind about that: Israel remains in His mind the people through whom He is going to reach the world. *For the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable* (Rom.11:29). So when God turned up in Jesus, it was unsurprising that his first task, his focus, was to rebuild Israel. To reclaim it. To make it what it was meant to be: the light to the nations.

But then the nations turn up, turn up in the person of the centurion, or of this woman, clamouring for his attention. Needing his help. And he hesitates not because He doesn't want to help, not because He thinks they're not worth it, but to make the point. The original plan still stands. The gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable. The Jews are indeed the chosen people. And to really receive what God wants to give, the nations have to know that, appreciate that, rejoice in that. They have to join themselves to the God of Israel.

This is why there was a huge debate in the early Church about whether Gentile Christians needed to be circumcised and keep the Law of Moses – essentially, to become actual Jews. It was quickly decided that no, they did not. But equally, their Gentile-ness would have to change. From now on, they – we – would be a very Jewish kind of Gentiles. We would read the Jewish prophets and Psalms, they would become our scripture. We'd have a Passover meal, of sorts, in the Eucharist. We'd have their moral law – and it's easy to forget now, centuries later, quite how radically different that law this was to that of the surrounding nations.

To be joined to God is to be joined to *this* God, who made Himself known to *this* people, with this history, in these books. You don't get God without His people. And that's the reason for Jesus' hesitancy, for his pause, before healing the woman's daughter. Does she get it? Does she know, as Jesus puts it in John's Gospel, that salvation is from the Jews? And she does. Even the dogs eat the crumbs from the table she says. God's grace overflows from Israel, into the world. She gets it, and so Jesus says Woman, great is your faith.

What's the point of telling this story today? Well, we're always tempted to forget. We're always tempted to think that the Old Testament was just some great big mistake, God's first draft before He got it right with Jesus. That He never really did choose the Jews. That we do not need them. That has been a tendency within Christianity from pretty much day 1. We tell this story to counter-act it. To remind ourselves that Jesus saw things in precisely the opposite way: that coming to Him meant coming to Israel, joining ourselves to Israel, learning from Israel. As St. Paul puts it elsewhere, the Jews are the root, the base, the trunk of the tree. We are like a strange branch which has been grafted in, which needs to get used to its new home, needs to grow into the roots and to be grateful for them. We're now very Jewish Gentiles.

So now to God who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit; the God of Israel and our God, be praise and glory forever and ever. Amen.