

Tamworth City Uniting Church

Worship on 16th August 2020



Acknowledgement of Country

As you enter this time of worship please acknowledge the custodianship of this land by the Gamilaroi peoples - the traditional owners of this land, and pay respect to their elders – past and present.

Call to Worship

Be still..... and know that I am God and there is none beside me.
Be still..... and know that I am God and there is none beside me.

I am the one whose love never fails and there is none beside me.
I am the one whose love never fails and there is none beside me.

I am the one who calls you my friends and there is none beside me.
I am the one who calls you my friends and there is none beside me.

Be still know that I am God

(Silence)

Opening Prayer

Generous and loving God, you call us to worship today.
May your Spirit move within us during this time. Amen.

Song *God is love, let heav'n adore him*

God is love, let heav'n adore him; God is love, let earth rejoice;
let creation sing before him, and exalt him with one voice.
God, who laid the earth's foundation, he who spread the heavens above,
and who breathes through all creation God is love, eternal Love.

God is love, and gently enfolding all the world in one embrace,
with unfailing grasp is holding every child of every race.
And when human hearts are breaking under sorrow's iron rod,
then they find that self-same aching deep within the heart of God.

God is love, and though with blindness sin afflicts our human hearts,
God's eternal loving kindness holding, guiding, grace imparts.
Sin and death and hell shall never o'er us final triumph gain;
God is love, so love for ever o'er the universe must reign.

TiS 153 Timothy Rees. Copied under CCLI Worship Licence No. 604439

Prayers

In you, gracious God, the widowed find a carer,
the orphaned find a parent, the fearful find a friend.

In you, the wounded find a healer,
the penitent find a pardoner, the burdened find a counsellor.

In you, the miserly find a beggar,
the despondent find a laughter-maker, the legalists find a rule-breaker.

In you, Jesus Christ, we meet our Maker, and our match.

And if some need to say, 'Help me'
and if some need to say, 'Save me'
and if some need to say, 'Hold me'
and if some need to say, 'Forgive me'
then let these be said now in confidence by us.

(Silence)

O Christ,
in whose heart is both welcome and warning,
say to us do to us,
reveal with us the things that will make us whole.

And we will wait and we will praise you. **Amen.**

(From *A Wee Worship Book*. Wild Goose Worship Group. Willow Connection)

Introduction to the Gospel

The gospel story for today is a marvellous one. It tells of Jesus' engagement with a Canaanite woman who wouldn't give up.

It speaks of her ministry to him and his ministry to her.

As we read it, we need to be aware that this is a story told from a Jewish point of view. Most of us who read it are non-Jews, and it takes an imaginative leap to appreciate its original impact.

The writer of Matthew takes the story as it is found in Mark's gospel and gives it a few tweaks to suit his purposes. You might like to take the time later to read both accounts side by side to see the differences.

The editorial care that Matthew expended on Mark 7:24-30 can be explained in part by the theological theme that the story raises: Where do Jews and Gentiles fit in God's plan of salvation,

Matthew highlights this theme from the start by naming the woman as a Canaanite and then, at the very centre of the text he places a saying that represents Jesus' position on the scope of his earthly mission. *I have been sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.*

Nevertheless, the Matthean Jesus is prodded by his Gentile conversation partner to admit some place for Gentiles too in God's plan of salvation.

In his version of the story, Matthew has turned the episode into a conversation and portrayed the Canaanite woman as a model of praying faith. What made the story especially significant for the Matthean community was her identity as a Gentile.

Relations between Jews and Gentiles were a very sensitive topic for the Matthean community. Though the majority of the community seems to have been Jewish by birth, some were Gentiles by birth. The conversation between Jesus and the Canaanite woman in Matthew would have functioned as a model - or at least a causal explanation, as to why Jews and Gentiles could exist together in the same Christian community.

On the one hand the Matthean episode preserves the salvation-historical precedence of Israel in accord with the biblical and later Jewish tradition. The God of Israel is approached by Gentiles through Jesus the Jew. Matthew may even have limited Jesus' activity to Jewish soil by having the Gentile woman come to him. If so, Jesus follows the rule laid down for his disciples in Matt 10:5 'Go nowhere among the Gentiles.

On the other hand there is a place for Gentiles at the banquet of God's kingdom (Matt 14:13-21) a fact that the Canaanite woman recalls by her play on Jesus' saying about the children (Israel) and the dogs (the Gentiles). Her request is finally honoured on the basis of her faith in Jesus' power - the criterion by which Gentiles become part of the Christian community. Immediately prior to this passage we have the account of Jesus' response to the Pharisees and scribes about what defiles and what does not. This arose out of the disciples breaking with the tradition of washing their hands before eating. The Pharisees just didn't get it and nor did Peter.

The story of the Canaanite woman shows that a defiled outsider actually had a more profound understanding than the leaders of the Jewish community.

She understood what they did not - that the good news belongs also to outsiders.

The two stories stand in complete contrast.

The Gospel *Matthew 15:10-28*

²¹ Jesus left that place and went away to the district of Tyre and Sidon. ²² Just then a Canaanite woman from that region came out and started shouting, "Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon." ²³ But he did not answer her at all. And his disciples came and urged him, saying, "Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us." ²⁴ He answered, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." ²⁵ But she came and knelt before him, saying, "Lord, help me." ²⁶ He answered, "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." ²⁷ She said, "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table." ²⁸ Then Jesus answered her, "Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish." And her daughter was healed instantly.

Message

I want us to think of a couple of questions that this passage throws up for us.

Firstly: Did Jesus learn from his encounter with the Canaanite woman?

But before I get to that, a story from my past.

In one of my former congregations a Uniting Church Army Chaplain was a member and, occasionally, he conducted services for me. On one of the Sundays he was preaching, this reading came up. In his sermon he suggested that Jesus had had his mind changed by this very persistent woman. Something I agreed with and, in fact, had preached on when the passage had come up in the lectionary three years earlier.

One of the members who were present came and spoke to me afterwards and said that she could not agree with him on the point, saying that Jesus' divinity made it impossible for him to have been wrong in his dealings with this woman.

We had a conversation about how both Jesus' divinity and humanity can be understood.

She was not convinced and, eventually, left the congregation because of what she saw as false teaching.

Like so many stories concerning Jesus, this story forces us to ask questions. At its heart, this challenging and even somewhat disturbing passage has a key interpretive question:

Did the Canaanite woman Matthew describes pass a test or persuade Jesus to change his mind?

If we go with the former – which is probably the more traditional reading – then Jesus didn't really mean what he said. You know, about saying he was exclusive, ministering only to the Israelites, let alone calling her a dog. All of this was just a test, a way of bringing to harvest the faith that God had already planted in her.

As I mentioned, this is probably the more traditional reading of the story. In fact, many commentators will draw our attention to the fact that the Greek word translated as "dogs" is actually the diminutive form of the word - meaning "little dog" or "puppy." They want to soften its interpretation and let Jesus off the hook. And I think it's only natural that we might want to agree with this interpretation – for the other interpretation puts Jesus in a bit of a bad light.

This interpretation is that Jesus' own sense of God's kingdom is challenged, stretched, and enhanced by his encounter with this fierce and persistent woman who wanted Jesus to do something for her child.

Jesus was a man of his time and place. He was a Jew and had been brought up to believe that the Israelites were God's chosen people. As his ministry developed he believed that his message was first and foremost, to the Jews: God had sent him to save God's people – the Israelites. I think Jesus was very serious about this and we see it exemplified in the story.

But he comes up against a woman who was fighting for the health of her child and she wasn't to be dissuaded. We all know how mothers, and indeed fathers, won't let things get in the way if they are speaking on behalf of their children.

And so, she takes Jesus on and, in fact, persuades him that something larger is at stake.

In this context, her "great faith" isn't so much an amount, but rather is simply the fact that she just holds on and keeps on persisting. She won't let Jesus go until she wrests a blessing from him on behalf of her daughter.

If we go in this direction, then Jesus can, in fact, learn - and he does.

He learns that God's kingdom and his mission to enact that kingdom is bigger than he had initially imagined and that it is more encompassing than he'd at first dreamed.

Does this mean he's not perfect or sinless or all the other things the most orthodox among us will worry about?

Well, to tell you the truth, I think those are questions this passage isn't interested in.

Rather, I think this passage invites us to imagine that God's purpose unfolded throughout Jesus' life and ministry and continues to do so in our own lives and experiences.

This tenacious and faithful woman, a complete stranger and an outsider, pushed Jesus to reconsider, to learn, and to grow.

All of which brings me to the second question: What can we learn from this story?

I ask this because of many, many conversations I've had with congregations and people over the course of my ministry. Conversations which this congregation has had as well. Conversations which include questions such as: Why are people not coming to church? What do we have to do to get younger people through our doors? How might we best serve God in our community?

It's no secret that the mainline traditions are both aging and getting smaller, and so many are wondering what happened, what went wrong, and how might we entice young adults and young families into our congregations. I remember having these conversations with a member of a former congregation and instead of answering her questions, I asked a couple of questions back: Have you asked any of the people you wish would come to church why they don't? Have you asked them what we might do differently in terms of Sunday worship and the other activities of the church that would make it meaningful for them?

The answer was 'No.'. 'No, that never occurred to me.'

This was a fairly understandable response from her.

Because our congregational patterns and worship practices seem to have worked for generations, it simply doesn't occur to us to ask others what they think of them. We simply assume this is the way to do congregational life and Sunday worship, or we go about changing things in ways that suit us.

But taking a cue from Jesus' encounter with the Canaanite woman, what we might do is wonder - with people who are on the fringes of our congregation or, indeed, outside it, how what we do as a community of faith might be more engaging and helpful as they seek to connect their faith and their everyday life.

Which means that if we want to learn, we first need to listen and once we've listened, we need to be open to changing how we nurture worship and congregational life in ways that are meaningful - not only to the ever-smaller but loyal number of "regulars" but also to the folk who aren't coming, or who used to come, or who might come.

So here's my suggestion and challenge for this week, and indeed the weeks ahead. Ask someone who's not part of a church why they don't find it meaningful enough to be part of.

Are there particular barriers or obstacles keeping them from coming (either in their own life or in the congregation)? Are there elements they just don't understand?

But then go on to ask them what might make church (not just worship) more interesting, more meaningful and useful to them as they try to live faithfully in the world?

I'm guessing it won't be hard to find someone willing to have this conversation. Perhaps it will be one of your children, or a sibling, or a family friend. Whilst you might find it a bit awkward to start with, it can be incredibly helpful.

We're good at talking in the church: I think it's time we learnt to listen - not just to those within our church community but, more importantly, to those who are not part of it, and it can be a transformative practice if we engage it with gusto.

Because here's the thing: that Canaanite woman Jesus met, dismissed, and then learnt from, was a person with a particular need. The "great faith" she demonstrated was that she wouldn't allow herself or, even more, her sick daughter, to be dismissed.

Too many people are used to being dismissed by the church. They assume - sometimes based on experience, that the church isn't really interested in them as persons with all kinds of needs and concerns and passions, but rather sees them just as potential members or giving units. And so they have no vested interest in being as tenacious as this woman was.

For this reason we need to reach out to the people around us as persons who have a lot to teach us. We know we don't have all the answers – let's take the time to engage with and listen to, those who may have much to teach us.

Song *When we lift our packs and go*

When we lift our pack and go, when we seek another country
moving far from all we know, when we long to journey free,

*God is in the other place, God is in another's face,
in the faith we travel by, God is in the other place.*

In the hands outstretched to greet, through the open doors of strangers
there is love we yet can meet and believe the Christ is there.

*God is in the other place, God is in another's face,
in the faith we travel by, God is in the other place.*

Shirley E Murray. Copied under CCLI Worship Licence No. 604439

Prayers of the People

(Prepared by Mariette Duns)

In our prayers today we remember the family and friends of Rod Richardson who died on Saturday after suffering a massive stroke. Rod was a much loved member of both our church the wider community.

God of mercy and love,

We turn to you with the prayers of our heart and the yearning of our souls.

Help us this day to bring ourselves before you, to feel your presence, to be still and know that you are God.

Help us to have the wisdom and sensitivity to discern your presence, to discern what you are willing us to do; to discern what we need to continue to do.

Teach us how to reach out with your love to those in need. Give us eyes to see those who are hurting, a heart to help them, and the strength to do whatever you would have us to do. Use us to do your work in this world. Please guide us and bless all that we set out to do each time you call us to love our neighbours

Comfort and heal those who are suffering in body, mind or spirit. Give them courage and hope in their troubles, and bless those who care for them. May your mercy shower all those we carry in our hearts.

We pray for the children of our world who hunger and thirst, the refugees fleeing unsafe and war torn areas and those who live in fear, those who have no home or place to call their own. Those who worry over employment, bills and food and struggle in this difficult and uncertain time.

Lord, we are sometimes overwhelmed by the troubles of this world. We feel discouraged, hopeless and inadequate to do anything significant that might help change all the crisis our nation is experiencing.

Renew our mind with your truth Lord.

We pray for those who have experienced bereavement and are reminded in so many different ways of the loss.

We pray for our political leaders, national and state that you would give them wisdom and insight.
We pray for all our medical teams, health professionals, for the sick and hospitalised during this pandemic, and for those of our church family who are unwell.
May they know your presence which brings healing and hope; courage and endurance; comfort and consolation.
We uphold our minister Reverend Betty, our family worker Gillian and Nicolette to you, cover them with your spirit, give them strength, hope and peace.
Give us, we pray, a spirit that continues to strive, to turn tragedy to triumph, to learn from disappointment and failure so we are stronger to face the future
May we always remember that no matter how difficult and bewildering the future may seem, that nothing can separate us from your love.
Thankyou Lord that you never leave us or forsake us. That you walk with us. We ask this in Jesus name. Amen

Song *We are your people*

We are your people; Spirit of grace,
you dare to make us to all our neighbours,
Christ's living voice, hands and face.

Joined in community treasure and fed,
may we discover gifts in each other,
willing to lead and be led.

Rich in diversity, help us to live
closer than neighbours, open to strangers,
able to clash and forgive.

Glad of tradition, help us to see
in all life's changing, where you are leading,
where our best efforts should be.

Give, as we venture justice and care
(peaceful, resisting, waiting or risking)
wisdom to know when and where.

Christ, as we serve you in different ways,
may all we're doing show that you're living,
meeting your love with our praise.

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Closing Responses

From where we are to where you need us,
Jesus, now lead on.

From the security of what we know
to the adventure of what you will reveal,
Jesus, now lead on.

To join with your Spirit and others in refashioning the fabric of this world
until it resembles the shape of your kingdom,
Jesus, now lead on.

Because good things have been prepared for us
as we step out in faith.
Jesus, now lead on.

Blessing

And the blessing of God –
Creator, Son and transforming Spirit
be with you this day
and remain with you always.
Amen!