

SERMON AT GELORUP 19:8:2017: OS 20 SUNDAY BETWEEN 1-20 AUGUST:

GEOFF CHADWICK

MATT 15:2-28 "CALLING A WOMAN A DOG"

A few years ago, which I was 15, in Year 10 I wrote a short play for English called: *The Three Must Get Tears or the Onion Peelers* by A Dumb A . As you can tell, my sense of sophisticated humour was well developed even then!

Now a little group of my fellow students performed this play in front of the class. The actors included some girls who, of course, were characters madly in love with the Onion Peelers. (But not the playwright, as it turns out!) Fittingly I had given these girl characters a lovely French name which was to make things seem a little more romantic (Not that I knew what romance was in Year 10!).

Now the character name I gave to one of the girls was *chienne*.

Now did I get in big trouble for that! Unfortunately for me there was a French speaker in the class who just happened to be best friend with my character.

"How dare you call my friend a dog" she yelled, and I quickly learnt the lesson of misunderstood humour. I was thinking of a *cute puppy*, but she had interpreted as *dog*. I was instantly guilty, without trial, of calling a young woman a dog! Sadly, any chance of romance I might have had with any of the girls in that class disappeared in an instant! (Not that there ever was a chance, as I did not know what romance was, and in any case, the girl's eyes were firmly transfixed on the Year 12 boys!)

So, it is not good to call a woman a dog!

So what was Jesus doing when he said to the Cannanite woman in today's story:

"It is not good to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs". (Mtt:15:26, NRSV)

Was Jesus calling the woman a dog? And if so is that something you would expect the Messiah to do?

It's tricky, but it's especially tricky if you read the story without any background or context. So let's have a look at that.

It is well known that in Jesus' time race relations between Jews and Gentiles were very poor. This woman, identified as a Cannanite (or Syrophonecian in Mk's version of the story) would have been considered a "dog" by the Jews of the time. Sadly, the Law to care for the foreigners in the land had long been forgotten and strangers were considered inferior and threatening. In the passage Mtt puts on Jesus' lips what was inside the heads of the followers around him. Jesus speaks the common wisdom of the day only to have it challenged by the woman herself: *"Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table"* (Mtt 15:27, NRSV). The woman's response elicits a higher truth than the perceived wisdom of the day. Shockingly, for the culture of the day, this higher wisdom comes from a foreign woman!

I think we 21st Century Westerners, miss this shock! But maybe we should. Wisdom, and truth come from women and foreigners!

(Even those whose Citizenship might be in question!)

Now we can get more out of this story if we think about why Mtt has included it in his Gospel. Mtt writing sometime late in the First Century is copying Mk and sees the need to include this encounter as part of his Gospel. Why? Because it addresses a particular issue of the church at that time.

Towards the end of the First Century the Church has a problem with non-Jewish converts to Christianity. There were some who understood faith in Jesus was for Jews only – at least those who had converted to Judaism first. I'm sure you are well aware of this. Then there were others who understood Judaism was of no consequence. Faith in Jesus was all that was required. So Mtt, following Mk, makes a parallel between this contemporary issue and a story of Jesus. We can see how he puts a history lesson into just a few words:

Yes, Jesus primarily ministered to Jews. *"I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel"* (Mtt 15:24, NRSV)

But here is a special case: *"Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish."* (Mtt 15:28, NRSV).

Yes, Gentiles can be faithful! And yes, Jesus honours her faith.

It's not that Jesus called a foreign woman a dog that matters. It's the fact that the foreign woman has faith. That is to say, this foreign woman is the example of who may be

converted. *All* may follow Jesus, without exception. This may be shocking news to some! But here's a thought – the average Anglican in the world today is a poor middle aged black African woman!

I wonder what truth, wisdom and faith might come from her?

The Lord be with you.

And also with you.