

Silence and Feasts

This is a profoundly difficult passage... Jesus says very little, but the few words that he does say upset our understandings and pictures of Jesus...

Yet, as we enter into it, we find that it is a story of faith; a story of seeking; and a story of holding fast to the truth that is revealed whilst being formed and shaped by the Lord's grace. As Christians we are called to follow Jesus... What do we do when Jesus leads us to unfamiliar places and then remains silent in the face of huge suffering and pain? What do we do when Jesus does not answer our requests to get rid of this completely inappropriate thing which is distracting us from our ministry, what do we do when Jesus seems to ignore us when we pray and beg him for help? It is a story of what sustains us in those places where we feel lost, confused and broken...

Let's look a bit of context. The first character we meet is Jesus. He has been shaking things up in Israel for a while now... He has preached a couple of massive sermons, fed a well over 5000 people, healed the sick, gotten the religious authorities pretty angry with him and now he has headed into Tyre and Sidon, which is up north of Israel near the coast.

As they are travelling through the country, a woman approaches Jesus. Canaanites are definitely outside of Israel. When we read Canaanite we think of the people who were in the land before Israel took possession of it. The Old Testament is very negative about Canaanites... This woman is a non-Jew... So, it is socially wrong for her to talk to men in public, and especially wrong for Jewish men to talk to a Gentile woman...

The woman speaks first "Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon." This is a woman who sees the truth of things... She is not begging for healing or transformation.. She knows that Jesus is Lord, knows that he is the Messiah and throws herself and her daughter completely at his mercy... We nod... This makes sense from our perspective, where else would one go for help?? We have all heard sermons which tell us to bow down before Jesus, to cast all things at his feet... The punch line is normally that God will come through, and meet our needs...

But as this woman surrenders and begs God to help her she is met with silence.... PAUSE>>>> Silence gets pretty awkward fast... especially when you expect someone to say something... I've had those moments when I've prayed, asking God to relieve me of a burden, to overcome a problem and I am met with silence... I'm sure we have all had those times... But yet it is silence that God does his biggest work... As he hanged dying on a Roman cross and was laid in a tomb, the Word of God was silenced – But the silence was redemptive... Jesus was abandoned by God... Jesus felt the silence that we feel. When we feel utterly abandoned by God, we can know that God Himself took on this abandonment... How does this woman stay faithful in the face of this apparent rejection? Luther writes "the woman cleaves to the Word even though it be torn from her heart as though by violence... still trusting that His goodness lurks beneath"... And as we are confronted by the feeling of rejection and abandonment we look to the cross, and we look beyond it to the Jesus' resurrection and the promise of life... Death, abandonment from God is not the final word, because God acts to ensure we can be with Him... I want to invite you now to pause for a couple of minutes and reflect on a time when you can identify with this experience... Pause, ask the Spirit to guide you as you look for where Jesus was in that place of abandonment...

*Pray: Lord, we know you have called us to life... but sometimes the silence is overwhelming. Please give us the grace to endure the silence and the ears to hear you calling us through the darkness.
Amen*

Sometimes it can be difficult to spot where Jesus is and was, and that is why we are not called to this life alone. If this has brought up something challenging or something positive for you, find someone to share your experience with after the service and hopefully we can help one another to see Jesus...

I want to change gears slightly and look at how the disciples respond... The disciples have been following Jesus for quite a while now. They are Jewish men with a Jewish worldview. They expect certain things about what the Messiah will do and what will become of Israel. The general expectation was that Israel would be re-established at the centre of the world, the nation that all other nations looked up to... Different understandings of Israel are important and I will come back to them shortly... The disciples have been with Jesus as he has done amazing and controversial things, and have now followed him into unfamiliar territory... Jesus has previously told them not to go to the Gentiles, but here he is leading them into Gentile territory and they do not get what is going on (apparently their beards were not long enough). They do not experience the same silence in the same way that the woman does, instead they are awkward and say "Lord, send her away... she is crying out after us" The disciples seem to think that Jesus is not responding, and so want her out of sight... out of mind??? How often is this our response?

Jesus' answer is puzzling. He says "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." It sounds like he is talking to both the disciples and the woman at this point. To the woman it sounds like he is saying "Sorry... You're not Jewish so... well... sorry..." To the disciples he is saying, "I was sent to you guys, you guys are Israel, but you are lost and need a shepherd to lead you back to what you are meant to be." It doesn't seem to advance the story much, so back to the woman..

The woman speaks again... Her words are even more desperate... "Lord, help me" If you thought the silence was awkward, well, it is even more awkward when Jesus responds by likening you to a dog. Jesus echoes what he said earlier, "Sorry, you're not Jewish," but this time he is blunt "It isn't fair to feed the children's food to the dogs."

The woman's response is fascinating. "Yes, Lord," she humbly accepts whatever Jesus says to her, she accepts that he has ignored her, and she accepts that she does not belong within the house of Israel, and even adopts his insulting language when she talks about herself... "Even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table."

Throughout the book of Matthew, echoes from the Old Testament are heard. Matthew is a very Jewish book, so it is helpful to have an understanding of what it means to be Israel. Israel is the people of the covenant. They are uniquely called by God... God promised Abraham that Abraham's descendants would be God's people for ever, and he would be their God. From Abraham, all the nations of the earth would be blessed. He confirmed that promise to Isaac, and to Jacob... And it is repeated throughout the prophets... Throughout Matthew, Jesus re-enacts this story.. He calls 12 disciples, bringing to mind the 12 tribes, he preaches the law from a mountain top, bringing to mind Moses, he feeds large crowds miraculously, bringing to mind manna in the desert... Jesus is basically redefining Israel with Himself at the centre.... God promised Abraham that all the nations of the earth would be blessed through Israel, and I think in this story this is one of the things we learn...

As followers of Jesus today, we must keep these lessons in mind... We have been grafted into the trunk of Israel... The church must not imagine that we are somehow separate from this Israel which Jesus is redefining around Himself. Through the death and resurrection of Jesus, we Gentiles, non-Jews, are engrafted into the house of Israel... And that means we are set aside for a particular purpose...

Israel is to have fellowship with God... As Jesus led the disciples into Tyre and Sidon, he led them into unfamiliar territory. But he took them there. And when Israel is with her king they feast... And a feast gathers people, it draws attention, and there is always left over – there is always more than enough for more people to come to the table... The woman seems to understand this aspect of what it means to Israel, and as she surrenders herself to Jesus, he uses her faith and understanding to teach the disciples what it means to be Israel. All the woman asks is that she might eat the crumbs that fall from the table, like a dog...

Why does Jesus lead the disciples into this place, where they would encounter this sort of person? What is he trying to teach them? I do not have the answers, but there has been a recurring question for me this week. And I haven't been able to answer it I believe we can only answer it in community... "Where should we be setting up our table?" As a church we regularly gather to have fellowship with Jesus, my question is where are the crumbs falling from our table? Who is gathering the leftovers? Are we able to recognizing the kingdom outside of the walls of our church?

I want to finish by inviting you to reflect on these questions. Take a few moments to discuss it with those around you, and in a few minutes I will lead us in a prayer...

Pray: *Gracious Lord,*

You have given us life. You move in strange ways... each time a little different from the last. Lord, as give us the faith to follow you as you lead us to unfamiliar places... Give us the eyes to see truth wherever we stumble across it; and the courage to invite others to your table.

Amen