

A straightforward reading of this passage where Jesus in effect calls a foreign woman a dog to our ears and in our time with the challenges of Black Lives Matter is frankly shocking. Much ink has been spilt trying to defend Jesus, quite why I am not sure, as none of excuses really feel that convincing. Since we have the simple account without much idea of the nuance of the raise of an eyebrow or any other cultural context, it is perhaps best that we hold on to this shock and explore the issues around it for us in a different time and context.

However, it is always good to look at the biblical context, Matthew doesn't put stories together just randomly and there is a hint of the connectedness of this passage with the one previous of which we get the end, and the word is bread. At the beginning of the chapter there is a dispute because Jesus' disciples are eating bread (the word isn't translated in some versions) without washing hands making the food and thus them unclean. Jesus challenges the Pharisees over this and goes on to talk about what really matters about a person, it's not the externals like eating but the inner life of a person that really matters.

They then go on holiday, and we have a second story about bread. Tyre and Sidon are some way away from Galilee on the Lebanese coast, it must have taken them quite a few days of walking to get there, Jesus clearly needed a break, and just as us in August why not the sea side, a great way to get a new perspective. Even better to go to somewhere foreign, and Tyre and Sidon are definitely gentile areas. Its here they meet this woman, who has to have considerable persistence. She has clearly done some research, or perhaps to Jesus annoyance as he has gone to get away from it all, she recognises him and calls him after his Jewish title Son of David, how did she know that? Equally shocking to me as what eventually says is the fact he says nothing at all, he keeps silent, I struggle with it, surely when I am in need God hears and answers me, not keeps silent? Yet he does here, maybe to draw out her faith, but I don't understand. Anyway this doesn't put her off, she just gets noisier, and the disciples get fed up, they don't want her around either. If anything here it's the fixed attitude that kills, their assumption that this foreigner and a woman too, has no call on Jesus and that he would send her away. I wonder whether what follows isn't Jesus' calling out of their attitude rather than an attempt to reject the woman.

He starts by saying I'm for the lost sheep of Israel, most of whom didn't think they were very lost in the first place by the way. I have to say this attitude that somehow Jesus is for us first, is quite prevalent today in the church. When I was a vicar I wanted to make changes to our comfortable evening service which to be honest was a nice holy huddle, so that other people would feel welcome and we could grow. Someone very angrily challenged me on this, what was I doing planning things for those who didn't come and ignoring those who did. In another church someone was sharing just how much she wanted her church to grow, and I said but what if they come and start changing things, oh she said I don't want that type of person to come!

Behind Black Lives Matter partly is this issue about how we like organising things for those like us, if we don't do training like Unconscious Bias we are in danger of appointing people to organisations who are like us, perpetuating barriers, keeping others out and avoiding difference. We tend to assume our way of doing things is the norm and thus don't want others with different norms to

come in and join us. We either implicitly or at times explicitly expect others to change to join, or in current language 'other' people. Ben Lindsey in this book we need to talk about race defines othering as "Any action by which an individual or group becomes mentally classified in somebody's mind as 'not one of us' its sometimes easier to dismiss them as being in some way less human and less worthy or respect and dignity, that we are" hence the horrendous notice in lodgings of old "no Irish, Blacks or dogs". "Don't throw the children's bread to the dogs"

Jesus uses here the language comfortable to the disciples, the Pharisees are recorded as saying the gentiles are the same as dogs. This is othering. Is this Jesus own language or is he challenging the othering of his disciples, who are looking at the externals of the woman and not what is coming from her heart. And is this exactly what the first part was about. It is no coincidence that Matthew records a second story about bread, this time being given to dogs, he is seeking to link these two passages together to remind us that it's not the externals that matter. It's not bread that matters and while it's easy to take Jesus simply to mean we don't have to eat a kosher diet as that's not what makes some one clean or defiled, Matthew in effect is extending what Jesus is saying that there is nothing about another that makes them unclean that is outward, it's not the externals but what's in the heart. While this is not made explicit, I would say that what Jesus here is demonstrating its not the externals of skin colour or race that matters, instead here is a woman of great faith, who doesn't tell Jesus what to do but simply asks for help, and does so with a great deal of quick wit. In this faith she is more than equal to any child of Israel.

Rev Kit Gunasekera in a talk at the Lambeth and Dulwich Churches' act of witness, in Brockwell Park, for Black Lives Matter said it was not a knee that killed George Floyd but an attitude. I wonder as we are shocked by the language used here whether we don't need to look into our hearts to see what really comes out when it's about other people who are different to us. What are the deepest attitudes Jesus might just uncover if he were to question us deeply? What space are we making for them, how do we subtly 'other' them, stereotype them, and assume things either that they have to conform, or without being silent to listen assume we may know what they are like.

We in this diocese, in the Church of England and in our individual churches have a long way to go, but our start is allowing the Holy Spirit to work in our hearts. A step back or out of the situation just as with Jesus taking the disciples out of Galilee enabled them to encounter this women and then I hope have their attitudes changed, slowly yes, but it was encounters like this that prepared the church to receive gentiles under Paul's ministry a few years later fulfilling Isaiah's vision of God's people for all people given him centuries before. Black Lives Matter is not something for this summer alone, but it's a journey with Jesus to work in our hearts so that what comes out will be the fruit of the Holy Spirit and then flowing out will bring justice.

Jesus was of course right he was sent to the lost sheep of Israel, he was human with limitations and just couldn't physically go to bring healing to all in the surrounding countries yet alone further a field, but in this encounter the woman in her persistence foresaw what would be the case, healing for all peoples and sought to bring it to her present. Are our prayers as we see the ultimate future of all people equal and all valued before the throne of God, as persistent in seeking to have a taste of

that future today. As we are rightly shocked by this encounter of Jesus with the woman can we let our shock stir us in prayer and action to make the possibility of one person treating another in this way impossible to conceive of yet alone do?