

Year A, Proper 20, Pentecost 12

Genesis 45: 1-15

Romans 11:1-2a, 29-32

Matthew 15: 21-28

What might we remember 2023 for? As much as anything I suspect that it will be remembered as a year of struggle, whether struggling to pay the bills as prices rocket, to stay healthy, even struggling to make sense of how wars and climate change somehow fit with the Good News.

And so, I think today's Gospel reading is actually rather encouraging in this year of struggle, because I suggest that it shows Jesus struggling to understand exactly how his mission should play out.

Yes, Jesus was fully divine and without sin, yet he was also fully human. After all, we are told in Luke chapter 2:52 that Jesus grew in wisdom. At what point did Jesus stop growing in wisdom?

In saying that Jesus struggled to grasp the extent of his mission, my understanding may well be wrong but it's the one that makes most sense to me – it may speak to you in a completely different way and that's fine too.

Here we find Jesus first of all being indifferent and then apparently downright rude to the Canaanite woman who wants her daughter healed. It is perhaps only her persistence, her humour, and her refusal to be offended that causes Jesus to think more deeply about the extent of his mission.

That decision to extend his ministry points directly to the Great Commission at the end of Matthew when Jesus urges his followers to go and make disciples of ALL the world. But don't forget the context in which Matthew was writing. His audience were Jewish and there had been a long and hard struggle in the early church to establish that anyone who wasn't a Jew was as entitled to receive God's salvation as the Jews.

Little wonder Matthew's Gospel points to the presence of people who weren't Jews in Jesus' genealogy. And it is only after this encounter that his ministry to the wider community takes off.

The verses that follow tell the tale of the miracle of the feeding of the 4,000 and the healings of many diseases. In those verses it isn't Jews who see and benefit from one miracle after another. We know that because they praised the God of Israel, indicating clearly this crowd was not Jewish.

But to return to the Gospel. Jesus' supplicant has three black marks before she even starts pleading with Jesus to heal her daughter – she is not a Jew, she is a Canaanite and she is a

woman, so an outsider of outsiders. Huge barriers to overcome. No wonder the disciples wanted to send her away, just as they had wanted to send away the 5,000.

Note also how eagerly they told Jesus a few verses earlier how offended the Pharisees had been by Jesus's comments on what made people unclean. Total silence on the other hand when it comes to Jesus's remarks to the woman.

Initially Jesus ignores her – perhaps thinking through the implications of limiting his ministry – and then says I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel; well that is how it has traditionally been translated.

But the late Michael Green, the great British evangelist, points out that the original Greek has no punctuation, and therefore could have been asking himself out loud 'Was I sent only to the lost sheep of Israel?', which of course puts a completely different slant on it.

The woman falls to her knees and pleads with Jesus again. On the face of it, we then see Jesus in his full humanity, for surely in his full divinity he would never have said It isn't right to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs. Although I should point out that the Greek word translated as dogs really means puppies. Perhaps Michael Green is right in suggesting that too was a question rather than a remark.

It is then that the woman does what most of us fail to do. She comes up with exactly the right response just when it's needed. Don't you find that often you think of what you should have said in a difficult situation – but six hours too late and the opportunity has gone? But this woman immediately ripostes with considerable humour and brilliant insight as she turns Jesus' apparent insult back on himself: Even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table, she says. In other words, Yes, it is right to take the children's bread and give some to the dogs.

It is this simple but profound response that prompts Jesus to grant her wish – and to broaden his ministry.

Because of course much of Jesus' ministry, as told in the Gospels, is done round the table. He eats with tax collectors and prostitutes; he breaks bread with sinners. The Pharisees condemn his disciples for not washing their hands before eating. It is as much at the table as anywhere that Jesus shows who God is.

It's as if Jesus suddenly understands what she is getting at. This outcast, this other, is saying where's my Good News, where's my place at the table? Which raises the question How well do we use our tables to show our non-Christian friends who God is, or indeed our Christian friends who may be struggling?

What is wonderful is that Jesus allows himself to be changed, to be bested in argument for the only time in Scripture. And he commends her for her great faith, an interesting contrast to last week when Jesus described Peter as of little faith.

As one commentator puts it, the woman's great faith was a gift to Jesus. God had a message for Jesus, and she was the messenger.

Instead of being confined to Israel, the Good News suddenly becomes inclusive – and was always intended to be fully inclusive. What the Canaanite woman taught Jesus, was, in the words of Barbara Brown Taylor, that God's purposes for Jesus' earthly ministry were even bigger than he had imagined, that there was enough of him to go round.

But as Tom Wright reminds us, the New Testament writers never forgot that Israel was special, always was the intended vehicle for spreading the good news to the rest of the world, so Jesus had to start there. It's just that the future broke into the present, Wright says. It was as if she was demanding Easter before Jesus had even got to the Cross.

In conclusion, the very unsettling times we are living in right now underline the importance of the Good News being for everyone, for the outsiders, the migrants desperately trying to cross the Channel, for the newly unemployed, the newly bereaved, for the starving, the homeless, the addicts, the prisoner, those struggling with their mental health, just as much as it is for those who already believe.

Jesus has shown us that we can grow into greater compassion and love if we are prepared to stop and listen to those we don't normally listen to. And we don't always need to wait for the future.

What could we Christians make happen in the present by badgering God now as the Canaanite woman did rather than leaving it to the future?