

Most of Jesus ministry is carried out in and around the northern edge of the Sea of Galilee but in our reading today we see that he has now travelled north into the country, between Tyre and Sidon, which was inhabited by Gentiles, not Jews.

It wasn't the first time that he had gone outside Jewish territory. He seems to have gone chiefly in order to be quiet, to pray, and to prepare himself for the suffering that he knew was soon to come. (There may have been other reasons why he left Galilee.... Herod and other Pharisees wanted him arrested and ordinary Jewish people wanted to make him a national king).

V24 "And when He had entered a house, He wanted no one to know about it; and yet He could not escape notice."

He was unable to escape the people when they heard that he was in their village.

This narrative sharply contrasts with the usual form of New Testament short stories, which highlight one of Jesus's sayings and give Jesus the last word.

The Syrophenician woman seeks Jesus out and asks him to heal her daughter of demon possession; he initially rebuffs her with a saying, "Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs,". He would appear to be calling her a dog.

The woman counters Jesus with her own argument, "Sir, even the dogs eat the children's crumbs."

Jesus responds positively, telling her "Because you have said this [literally "for this word], the demon has gone out of your daughter."

The woman's own teaching seems to turn the tide and provoke Jesus's healing for her daughter.

The Syrophenician Woman is a unique figure in the gospels, because she successfully challenges Jesus, and he commends her for it.

She speaks the Greek language and worships heathen Gods like the Greeks did. Jesus spoke to her which shows that he knew a little of her language in addition to his own languages of Hebrew and Aramaic.

The woman knew that Jesus was using the word "children" to mean Jews and the word dog or house dog to mean Gentiles.

At first it seems as if Jesus is speaking rudely to her or refusing to help anyone who is not a Jew.

Why did he speak in this way?

It was not because he despised women, he treated women with the same care that he showed men.

It was not because he despised Gentiles.

Scripture records that He cured the Gentile demon possessed man of Gerasa, (he cast out the demon into a drove of pigs).

He cured a Gentile Centurion's servant who had faith enough to believe that Jesus only had to speak the word rather than come to the man's home and a Gentile nobleman's son, showing by his actions that he had no racial prejudice.

It was maybe because he needed to be quite to think over a difficult situation and he didn't want to attract attention by doing miracles and teaching.

But when he did miracles and taught the people, he had to give his attention first to the Jews. God had chosen this race to make himself known to all the world.

Thus, when he spoke to the woman it was as if he were saying, it is my plan to teach and heal only Jews at this stage of my work, but of course I will heal your daughter.

It was because of the words, her persistence and the love that she had for her daughter that Jesus healed her. Matthew's gospel says, "You have great faith".

She had great faith in these ways: She trusted Jesus: She was unselfish: she was persistent: and she used her intelligence.

Why does Jesus at first turn the woman away?

The "children" in Jesus's saying are understood as the children of Israel, or the Jews, and Jesus says his mission is primarily to reform the nation of Israel.

"Dogs" (literally "little dogs") have a negative association in the Hebrew Bible and rabbinic literature, probably linked to the ferocious wild dogs in the

Mediterranean world. In the New Testament they are also associated with impurity so here “dogs” means “outsiders” or non-Jews.

Why is the woman significant?

Some have noted that the woman’s status as a woman, a gentile, and foreigner would render her “triply marginalised,”.

Marginalised?? Well, where have we heard that before? More than 2000 years later people of different faiths are still being marginalised.

Recently we have heard a lot about the anti-Semitism in the Labour party. Over the years we have heard of Missionaries who have been killed for their faith. When I went to school Roman Catholic children had to sit in the classroom and read whilst the rest of us went to our “Christian” Assembly.

Thousands of foreigners of all backgrounds are rejected, we only have to look back to just after the second world war to see houses where there were rooms to rent, with notices in the window No Blacks No Irish No Dogs.

Hundreds have crossed the channel to come here for a better life but faced rejection. Just this week we have heard people complaining about Afghan refugees coming here.

Women up and down the land are grateful to the sacrifices and demonstrations made by the suffragettes; people like Emeline Pankhurst whose perseverance got women in this country the vote, but sadly today there is still great attention and surprise when a woman gets a job traditionally done by a man.

The woman in our story today is said to be from Syria Phoenicia. Syria was the name of the Roman province that included parts of present-day Syria, Lebanon, Turkey, and Israel, later merging with Judea to become Syria-Palestina.

Phoenicians were an ancient Semitic people related to the biblical Canaanites, who inhabited city-states throughout the Mediterranean.

One of their population centres was Tyre, a coastal city in present-day Lebanon, about twelve miles north of the border with Israel. Both geographically and ethnically, the Syrophenician woman represents someone on the borders between Jews and gentiles. In verse 7:26 the word “Greek” also designates her as a non-Jew.

Most interpreters have understood the story to be part of the expansion of Jesus's mission to the non-Jewish world.

Biblical translations invariably include a subheading to Mark's version of the story such as "the Syrophenician Women's Faith." Given her quick and clever response and Jesus's praise for her word, maybe a better subtitle would be "the Syrophenician Woman's Wit."

The Syrophenician woman understood:

Her unworthiness.

The grace of God is big enough to go beyond His chosen people.

The grace of God was big enough for even her.