

Answering Back

Matthew 15:10-28 & Genesis 44:33-45:1-15

Rev Margaret

Have you watched The Odyssey yet? What did you think? We can talk about that later, but now I'd like to focus on Argos, Odysseus's dog.

Argos is one of the heroes of the story because of his great and touching loyalty. The Odyssey is one of the oldest stories on record from the cultures that interacted with the communities we find in the Bible. It was written down almost 3,000 years ago, and that tells us that dogs have been a part of the human story for a long, long time.

I am guessing that you each person here has thoughts and feelings about dogs. You might love them all, like I do. You might be afraid of them. You might be allergic to them. You might find them really annoying. But few people tend to be totally neutral about these creatures who have interacted in different ways with humans for thousands of years.

In today's reading from Matthew's Gospel, we hear Jesus introduce dogs into a conversation in a way that feels very uncomfortable for those of us who love Jesus. Frankly, we can't get around the offensiveness of Jesus's initial response to a woman who has come to him for help. Even those of us who love dogs feel uncomfortable when we hear Jesus compare this woman with a dog begging for food that belongs to children.

Imagine you are reading this passage for the first time. One of the first things you might wonder is if Jesus might not have a lot of respect for women. We don't have to look far to see that's not true.

Two of the most significant of Jesus's theological conversations in the Gospels are with marginal women. Think of the Woman at the Well in John 4. She is a woman. She is a Samaritan. And she has been in 5 marriages that have ended in bereavement or divorce. Reason after reason why a man like Jesus might back away from her.

Reason after reason why it was shocking that, instead of backing away, Jesus engaged her in a deep theological discussion.

And then there is the person in our story this morning. She is a woman. She is a Gentile – not a Jew. Matthew calls her a Canaanite. Mark calls her Syrophenician, which would be more accurate, but Matthew has his reasons. I'll say more about that in a bit, but we are also told she has a daughter who is described as being tormented by a demon. Whether or not that would be considered an accurate

diagnosis today, the suspicion of demonic activity at the time would be enough for her family to have been avoided. So, there she is – a woman and a Gentile, with apparent demonic activity in her family.

In the language of the world Jesus grew up in she would have been considered unclean. And that is important as we try to understand this story because just before she appears in Matthew, Jesus has been talking about cleanness and uncleanness.

Now, of course, Jesus was not talking about bacteria or viruses which can enter the body through unwashed hands. He was talking about spiritual impurity.

What I understand Jesus to be saying there is that if you have an impure heart – if you are harbouring hatred or lust or envy and refusing to let go of those things – then you can wash your hands all day but you will never be pure. What is in your heart is bound to come out.

There are people who do all the right things and look like they have everything going for them, religiously, but in fact are nowhere near God. Conversely, we have this Canaanite woman who looked like an unclean outsider, yet whose love for her daughter gave her a purity of purpose that cut through Jesus' resistance.

And Jesus does resist her request, and that makes this story interesting and uncomfortable. For most of the story, Jesus speaks just like any other religious leader from his society and not like the radical reconciler that we know him to be. He speaks to her like she is less than human – saying that healing her daughter would be like taking food meant for the family and throwing it to dogs.

That's a hard thing to hear from Jesus, isn't it! Even here today in Canberra, where we all love dogs, it is still an insult to call a human a dog.

Humans have been living with dogs for Millennia, but we don't see a lot of dogs in our Bibles and I have a thought about why that may be.

In many ancient cultures, dogs have been revered as sacred, and sometimes as having healing powers – possibly because of their tendency to lick people's wounds.

The Jewish people, when they were striving to faithfully worship only the one true God, tended to avoid anything that was considered sacred by people who worshipped other gods.

So, dog's may have been considered as spiritually tainted by the people Jesus lived with because they were considered sacred to other peoples. They would also have been considered physically unclean because they were! If the people of Galilee and Judea didn't domesticate dogs, then they only would have seen dogs running wild in packs and eating garbage.

So, there's another dimension to Jesus comparing this woman with a dog. A spiritual dimension. Not just insulting her value as a human being but also claiming that she was spiritually unclean.

It is not comfortable to hear Jesus say things like that, is it?

We want to know what was going on in his mind. In some other places in the Gospels the authors give us little hints into Jesus' motivation: like "He only said this to test them. He didn't really mean it." We really want Matthew to say that here, but all Matthew gives us is a stark account of Jesus' words and the woman's words. We are left to feel the force of the tension in the passage. We are left to wonder: Could Jesus really think that way about a person who has humbly asked him for help.

Matthew and Mark choose not to resolve that tension but to make the readers sit in that uncomfortable place. And while we briefly feel the discomfort of that question, let's remember that the Canaanite woman lived with it every day.

Jesus is saying out loud the things a lot of her neighbours would have thought.

Think of people today who are told that God rejects them, because of who they are, where they were born or what they believe.

What does faith look like for someone living in that space of rejection and insult?

Well, according to Jesus, it looks a lot like this woman! It looks like refusing to take "no!" for an answer. It looks like refusing to believe that God is unloving or unjust. Even when Jesus seemed to be saying so. Her daughter's life was at stake, so she argued back to everything Jesus said.

Remember Abraham arguing back when God announced judgement on the town where his nephew lived.

Remember Moses arguing back when God claimed to be about to abandon the people Moses was leading through the wilderness.

And remember the story of Tamar!

If you read all through the Joseph story, from Genesis 37 to 50, we find a rather unsavoury story in chapter 38 that seems a bit out of place, because it isn't about Joseph. It is about Joseph's brother, Judah, and a Canaanite woman called Tamar.

I think that is why Matthew calls the woman we are talking about a Canaanite rather than a Syrophoenician. He wants us to think about Tamar. Judah brought Tamar into his family by marrying her to one of his sons. She was treated very badly in that family and then sent back to her father. She refuses to accept that. She uses trickery to show Judah how far he has fallen from God's will since that first false step we read about last week when he sold his brother, Joseph, into slavery. Judah repents and declares Tamar to be more righteous than he is.

We see the depth of that repentance in the passage we read this morning from Genesis 45. Judah, who had been so fed up with his boastful, indulged little brother that he had sold him into slavery, has been transformed into someone who is willing to become a slave to protect Benjamin, his father's other favourite.

It was at that point that Joseph chose to reveal himself and be reconciled to his brothers.

Tamar's brave, righteous protest against Judah brought about the repentance in Judah that led to this reconciliation. And the reconciliation gave a future to the whole family. And when Matthew lists the names of Jesus's ancestors, he includes Tamar's name. So we know, from the very start of his Gospel that Matthew sees Tamar as an important person in Jesus's ancestry.

Arguing back, even to God, in the name of love and justice is encouraged in the Scriptures. Of course we get things wrong sometimes. But God wants us to object when it seems to us that God has decreed something unloving or unjust. Even if we are wrong, God would rather we argue than give up and walk away.

Read the book of Psalms and see how many of those prayers include people getting really angry at God. What is important is that they express their anger to God. They don't walk away and give up on God. Just as Tamar didn't give up and walk away from Judah's family; just as the Canaanite woman didn't walk away and give up on Jesus.

She hears Jesus's insult about dogs and domesticates the image. She speaks of puppies under the table. Not unclean creatures that should be outside, but cute little creatures that belong inside. She places them under the table, not demanding a full meal but ready to clean up the scraps.

Jesus sees her point, declares that she has great faith, and heals her daughter. And this is the only time in all the Gospels when someone wins an argument with Jesus.

I wonder if that is why Matthew chooses not to tell us about Jesus' motivation. If he had said, "Well of course Jesus didn't mean those things he said. He was just testing her!" that would diminish the woman's status as the one person who ever won an argument with Jesus. And Matthew is determined to give her all the status and honour she deserves.

This story makes it very clear that the voice of protest from people on the margins is welcome, blessed and honoured by Jesus. He spoke of great faith, because it takes great faith to keep insisting that God is just, loving, generous and welcoming when some religious people act as if that's not true. And it takes great love to be willing to have those arguments on behalf of someone we care about.

Amen.