

The Spirit of Christ calls us to be open to new truth, new understandings, beyond the borders we construct around ourselves.
Matthew 15:21-28

This morning I wish to do things a little differently, our reflection being more in the form of a Bible study than a sermon;

partly because the passage is disturbing in terms of Jesus' response to the Canaanite woman.

Before we start I wish to make two introductory points that may help us to understand it more clearly:

- (1) Matthew is most likely writing for a Jewish Christian community living outside Israel in a gentile/foreign city, possibly Antioch in modern Syria, where there is a large Jewish community worshipping in a nearby synagogue.
It would appear Mathew's own community are struggling with the issue of whether they can remain members of Judaism and also be followers of Christ.
- (2) The passage before today's Gospel is a lively exchange between Jesus and some Pharisees who are shocked at how Jesus' actions seem to undermine their Jewish religious traditions.

Biblical scholars believe Matthew himself was a scribe, and with his community was struggling to integrate the Gospel with their own religious traditions, and significantly, whether the Gospel is intended for all people, not just those of the Jewish faith.

Matthew wrote his Gospel for people who saw themselves as 'Sons (and daughters) of David'.

(I am indebted to Fr John Shea, Jesuit priest, for what follows)

Jesus was walking along the borders of Tyre and Sidon.

Tyre and Sidon are in gentile/foreign territory (modern Lebanon) just to the north of Galilee, Israel. And Jesus is a 'border walker'. He walks in those messy/uncertain areas where people put up barriers around themselves, both for security but also in order to maintain their identity apart from others who are different from themselves.

Borders are places of surprise where walkers find themselves out of their comfort zones, unfamiliar territory, being challenged by the very presence or attitudes of others they encounter in those places.

And Jesus does in fact encounter another border walker there.

*Just then a Canaanite woman, living in those borders, came forward, crying out, "Lord, Son of David, have mercy on me. My daughter is terribly troubled by a demon."
He gave no word of response.*

Wandering in the borderlands Jesus is challenged by another border walker, a Canaanite woman (more particularly a non-Jewish woman), who reminds him who he is – a Son of David (Jewish man)

In the borderlands: A man is confronted by a woman,

A Jew is confronted by a non-Jew,

A 'son of David' is confronted by a Canaanite (pagan)

In the story we are reminded that borders are a human construct – as if we need reminding given the current conflict going on in the Ukraine or the tragedy that is Israel/Palestine!

This reality is captured and expressed by Wislawa Szymborska in her poem printed in our orders of service:

*Oh, the leaky boundaries of man-made states!
How many clouds float past them with impunity;
how much desert sand shifts from one land to another;
how many mountain pebbles tumble onto foreign soil in provocative hops!.....
Among innumerable insects, I'll single out only the ant
between the border guard's left and right boots
blithely ignoring the questions "Where from?" and "Where to?".....
Only what is human can truly be foreign.
The rest is mixed vegetation, subversive moles, and wind.*

In the borderlands of gender, ethnicity and religious beliefs, two people – a Jewish man and Canaanite woman – identified by their differences, by what they are not, encounter one another.

And Jesus *gave no word of response.*

And here is the disturbing feature of this story.

The woman takes the initiative and displays many of the qualities Jesus normally values, yet he freezes her out.

The problem lies not with the woman, but elsewhere, in Jesus' perception as being a Son of David.

He has constructed his identity and his mission at this stage too narrowly; not on the borders but within the boundaries of Judaism.

Jesus replied, "My mission is only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel."

She came forward and knelt before him, saying, "Help me Lord."

"It is not right," said Jesus,

"to take the food that is meant for the children and throw it to the dogs."

Is it possible that up until this moment Jesus had assumed his mission was to the 'lost sheep' of Israel, within the boundaries of his own ethnicity and tradition?

Has it taken a Canaanite woman to challenge him to broaden his mission beyond the boundaries of ethnicity and religious beliefs which he had inherited by nature of his birth?

"Yes, Lord," she replied. "But even the dogs eat the scraps that fall from the master's table."

Could it be that in these few lines we are witnessing the unblocking of Jesus' own mind, in order for him to redefine himself and his mission more broadly?

There is a subtle twist in the story where the woman no longer addresses him as 'Son of David' but as 'Lord', suggesting God has sent Jesus not only to his own people but to all people.

Jesus is challenged to redefine himself beyond his Jewishness, and in that realization his power of compassion and mercy is released:

"O woman," said Jesus, "great is your faith. Be it done for you as you desire."

That very moment her daughter got better

Jesus is open to new understandings.

Through this encounter we are drawn to the irresistible conclusion *that Jesus himself is still in the process of growing in his knowledge and understanding of the incredible love and grace of God.*

This story was perhaps treasured by the early church, related both by Matthew and Mark, because it suggested Jesus did not so much enter human life in perfect form,

but that like us he also needed to have his mind unblocked to unconscious assumptions and perceptions,

his mind opened to new understandings and new truths that God may reveal to him within the challenges and experiences of life.

Even Jesus had to look beyond the human constructs of his culture to discern and re-define himself and the mission God had called him to fulfill to the whole of creation; to and for all people.

Last Tuesday Tim Jensen, a minister colleague at North Belconnen UCA shared with me and other ministry colleagues an experience that may help us understand.

A number of years ago Tim was invited to a Frontier Services conference in Adelaide where the topic was "Crossing the Line". Many good speakers related stories of how they had to radically shift their thinking and cross a line which seemed impossible at the time.

One of those speakers was an Aboriginal minister from Western Australia who related such a time when he had to shift his thinking. He was taking a service in a Perth congregation only a few months after the then Prime Minister Paul Keating delivered the ground breaking Redfern speech.

He felt emboldened to compare the line drawn in the sand against Aboriginal people with the Canaanite woman in the Gospels, his sermon a profound challenge to the congregation.

In concluding, he asked those gathered,

“When will you cross the line of racism to welcome Aboriginal people?”

Well’ at the end of the service he processed down the aisle and as he came to the door, music playing, he suddenly stood frozen in his tracks, unable to move, as he heard the same question asked of him:

“When will you cross the line of racism to welcome white people?”

He looked around for the person who said it, no one was near him.

He felt it could only have come from God: Could he acknowledge and cross the line of his own prejudice?

He felt he must.

As the congregation looked on at him standing at the door, his mind unblocked, he crossed the line into the light of a new day.

No one else knew how important that moment was for him but it changed everything.

Conclusion

Sadly, borders in our world are a human construct which often define us too narrowly, whilst God is constantly seeking to open us up to new understandings of our shared humanity; a holistic understanding of our world and its people.

And so Matthew relates this story to his Jewish congregation as they gather for worship one Sunday morning, possibly in the gentile city of Antioch.

They are still sons and daughters of David but now the Spirit of Christ is calling them to be more open and redefine themselves more broadly as also being children of God, aware of the common humanity they share with their gentile brothers and sisters.

Are we – like Jesus – able to approach life as an unfolding process of discovering new truth and understanding,

being prepared to have our minds unblocked,
our preconceived assumptions tested and refined by the power of love?

Do we understand the life of faith is not so much about possessing ‘the truth’ and rejecting anything that does not fit into our own neat and comfortable world view,

but rather being open to new understandings;
open to the possibility that Christ may be calling us to re-define ourselves and include those we presently exclude?

Are we open to the possibility that God has yet more light and truth to break forth from his word?

Open to Christ’s holistic vision of a shared humanity where our lives and our world might be healed and transformed by the inclusive love and grace of God. Amen