**An offensive tale**

One of the privileges of being a College Chaplain, which I was from 2002-2009 is that you spend a lot of time with people in their place of work or study. And I spent a substantial proportion of my time with University staff or students who had no Christian commitment at all. In that way, it was rather different from parish ministry.

As well as being a huge privilege and opportunity, it gave me a lot of insight into how people outside the Church view the Church, the Christian faith and, of course, Jesus Christ.

While I was there, in what was St Martin’s College, Lancaster college and is now the University of Cumbria, we had to merge a Church of England Higher Education college with two secular campuses. Concerns surfaced about take-overs, the church being anti-gay, anti women, anti other religions, anti artistic freedom anti most things. And you can see how they might have come to those views, given what church leaders have sometimes said.

But when you get chatting about other stuff, the questions come, and a surprising amount of respect for Jesus emerges. Usually Jesus isn’t the problem for the non-Christian; it’s the Church or all those Christians.

So, today’s gospel gives us a problem. Here, unlike many other places we could list, Jesus appears to reject someone. His words to the Canaanite women seem to be offensive and rejecting (at least at first sight) Sent only to the house of Israel? Throwing food to the dogs?

Where is the Jesus who touches unclean lepers, speaks and shares vessels with Samaritans, eats with tax-collectors and sinners and calls a motley crew his friends when he could have had the pick of the scholars and elite?

Let’s have another look:

Jesus has withdrawn to a Gentile region for a break. Nowhere in Jewish Palestine could he get away from the crowds easily, so here we may be in modern-day Lebanon. The woman is a Canaanite – Luke calls her Syro-Phoenician - but Matthew wants to highlight for us that she is descended from the people who were the enemies of Israel in former times. She is a Gentile, a descendant of enemies, and she’s disturbing Jesus while he’s on a short break.

Does this help us with this very difficult conversation?

‘Have mercy on me Lord, Son of David’, she says. ‘My daughter is tormented by a demon’. Whatever you think demons are, the daughter is very disturbed, and her mother is worried sick. Jesus is a source of hope, and she calls him Son of David, which was a political title. She is saying he is heir to the throne of the king who ruled Israel a thousand years before. That empire had destroyed and displaced her own people. Secondly, she calls him Lord, which implies she saw spiritual authority in him.

Now we need to remember that Matthew is writing for a Jewish audience. He is aware of the difficulties in the early Church: do we accept Gentiles (non-Jews) on equal terms as Christians? What rules still apply? Food laws? Sabbath? Circumcision? You can see the debates in the book of Galatians and the early chapters of Acts.

Jesus stays silent for this Gentile woman, apparently deep in thought. The disciples want a quick solution – send her away, she’s drawing attention (she’s spoiling our holiday).

I wonder what our reaction might have been there? She’s being a pain in the neck? We’re on holiday. She’s a foreigner, why should we be bothered? Many would say that.

Jesus seems to think out loud at this point: ‘I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel’. That’s certainly been true so far for him, and we see that in the earliest days of the Church in the book of Acts; the mission to the non-Jewish world comes later. The woman persists – help me

Jesus then compares helping her with throwing food to dogs! Now it’s worth knowing that dog is a Jewish term of abuse for a Gentile. But the word used here in the original Greek language is not the one for wild dogs, but the one used for pet dogs or puppies. We miss that in an English Bible, because you can’t always get it across. (Just think how you would try and explain the phrase ‘raining cats & dogs’ to someone who spoke a different language!)

Back in the plot, Jesus is playing with words. Not to be outdone, the woman takes him up – she has some spirit.

‘Yes, Lord, even the dogs (pet dogs / puppies) eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table’.

Jesus reacts immediately, commending her faith and healing her daughter.

He can see that she has understanding well beyond many who have been following him around. For a start, she persists – she doesn’t give up. Second, she joins in the word game, but to get the third strand we have to go back again to the original language (sorry)

Worship. It’s an interesting word, and its not obviously connected with this story. But it is.

Matthew wrote in Greek, and the Greek word for worship is proskuneo. Its basic meaning is lovely – it means to approach (pros) in order to kiss (kuneo). But if you break the word down a little more, it is quite revealing. There are a number of words for kiss, but this one has a sense of coming into the presence of a great one bowed low to kiss their hand – in other words to approach and offer worship in the same way that a dog would greet – licking the hand. Some people believe that the ‘kuneo’ part ultimately derives from the work for dog ‘kuon’. In that sense, we are all to be puppies, but only the Canaanite woman understands that.

I think the word play between Jesus and the Canaanite woman has this in the background. Pet dogs and puppies understand affection, loyalty and true worship, as does she, and she understands that the “children’s food” Jesus is referring to – the Gospel currently being preached to the Jews will spill over and feed the non-Jewish people too. What’s more, if they are like her, they will value and appreciate it when that good news is preached.

In our house it has been known for the children to be a little fussy over what they eat, but both dogs we have owned have always been willing to eat what drops. Jesus understands that the woman recognises that the Gospel is true food in a way that many of the Jewish people he is meeting resist, and that is why he commends her.

So, may we appreciate the good news that we have received. May we recognise that what Jesus gives us is real food to be appreciated. May we always be willing to learn from him – and also be willing to learn from others. Even the stranger and outsider. Amen.