

# Did Jesus change his Mission Plan?

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A Contemporary Reflection by Rev Gareth Thomas-Burchell

Pentecost 11A

Isaiah 56:1, 6-8; Matthew 15: (10-20), 21-28

This reflection can be viewed on You Tube at <https://pittstreetuniting.org.au/spirit/reflections/>

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This gospel story is meant to make any feel squeamish and uncomfortable. It does for me, and even though I agree with the Canaanite Woman, her message of uncompromising inclusiveness still makes me feel uncomfortable. And that, I think, is a good thing!

Jesus' confrontation with the Canaanite Woman can be greeted with either perplexity or relish. Perplexity, because for many, Jesus is this perfect human who never makes mistakes, always treats people right, is forever kind and caring, and carries himself with that image of gentility and calm. Right?

Or the passage can be greeted with relish, because Jesus shows his humanity as most of us often do with its flaws and rough edges. Jesus, in this story from the Gospel according to Matthew, is snarly and abrupt, and appears to be focussed on something other than the immediacy of the moment. Was this the one time that Jesus got it wrong, or could it have been that he learned a lesson from this Canaanite Woman about inclusivity, that God's message and relationship was for everyone?

Did Jesus change his mission plan? Did his mission plan change from exclusiveness to inclusiveness? Did Jesus change his focus of mission to not only include the Jewish people, but also for the gentiles in their many expressions? That is a big change of mission plan.

For those who consider the agenda of the writer of Matthew's gospel, they would be saying that this was written about 70-80 CE and in the context of that particular time, the writer was opening up the possibility that relationship with God was for everyone, not only for the Jews, but also for the Gentiles. But this is the story that we have today, and it transports us back to the time of Jesus and what he was doing at that time.

The story is meant to make us uncomfortable, but then, many stories in the gospel has that discomfort that moves us from a present thinking to something new altogether. Change is always uncomfortable and awkward, and filled with both terror and excitement at the same time.

The disciples are very aware of this woman who was insisting on attention and acknowledgement – and it was perpetual for them! They are embarrassed and want Jesus to send her away just as they asked for him to send the crowd of five thousand away just before evening in another story that is familiar to us.

It is as if the immediate need is now getting in the way of another priority. And to modernise the context to present day followers of Jesus, we could say, “*No, I cannot do this now because I am going to church*”, “*No, I cannot pay you attention because I am preparing for a meeting*”, or “*I would rather not care about you now because I have another pastoral matter to attend*”. How ironic! Sound familiar?

The excuses continue. Ministry, whether lay or ordained, is about tending to the immediacy of interruptions, and though interruptions appear to get in the way of ministry, much ministry is done while in the moment of interruption.

Covid-19 has been a major interruption for the world, and certainly for the church. It has got in the way of plans and strategies, economic projections and community celebrations.

And so Jesus is interrupted by this Canaanite Woman. And why? She has a daughter possessed by a demon, or to use the modern vernacular, possible schizophrenia.

A Canaanite woman, a foreigner to boot, throws herself at the feet of Jesus. Strange as it may seem, we tend to expect the unexpected when following Jesus, whether in familiar or unfamiliar places. The interrupting Canaanite Woman is unexpected and – well, some have said – a nuisance.

Being both a Canaanite and a woman is a double whammy. Yet the Canaanite woman is not afraid to confront this Jewish man called Jesus. He’s in her neighbourhood now, and she has a desperate need—her daughter is tormented by a demon.

What mother would not want her child healed? She goes against social and religious norms for the purpose of receiving healing for her child. She speaks up and out to this man she calls “*Son of David*” for mercy, not knowing what his response will be. Not knowing that at all.

She takes a stand, a risk, and crosses a boundary. If anything, she leaps over the boundary for the sake of her daughter.

At first, Jesus doesn’t even respond. But the disciples do. Taking the opportunity to show their bias when they say, “*send her away*”, or to be more blunt, “*Dismiss her.*”

This story is echoed when the disciples also encouraged Jesus to dismiss that large crowd in the feeding of the 5000 story. Remember?

So the woman, to whom the text gives no name, receives no apparent compassion from the disciples. She is a foreign woman; they have no concern for her kind; they want to build a wall, a boundary. And Jesus doesn’t appear to react much better—he seems concerned only with exclusivity in favour of his own people, the house of Israel.

But this woman doesn’t give up easily. As one person said recently in a group discussion on this passage, it could be that the Canaanite Woman is used to such treatment, she is used to rejection, she is used to being brushed off and seeing backs turned.

But she presses against such resistance; as a woman she is used to this. She continues to speak up and out until she is at least acknowledged. She knows there are cultural norms that may prohibit her deepest desires, but she is not willing to accept those norms to continue as being acceptable. She pushes against them and reveals her humanity to Jesus: “*Lord, help me.*” She is a human in need like any other human.

But Jesus seems slow in empathy toward her. He even calls her a dog—as opposed to a child of God, a human. God’s creation, made in the image of God!

Jesus calls her a dog!

Yet she doesn’t allow his insensitive, insulting words to deter her. When Jesus says, *“It is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs,”* her quick witted response is, *“Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table.”*

One might say her sheer gall is the reason that Jesus takes notice. Because she speaks the truth, because she debates with Jesus, because she argues a theological truth, Jesus takes note, changes his mind, and discards his self-imposed boundary. Jesus says her faith is great—and her daughter is healed, instantly and in that moment. The truth opens the door to healing and life.

This woman shows how a person can be bold and brave in approaching God without fear. Her priority is the healing of her daughter, and nothing can deter her—not even an apparent insult from Jesus. Silence is not an option, only life and healing are the options. She believes that her daughter, a human being, deserves healing—deserves health care—like any other human being.

Though there is resistance at first, Jesus gives in to this foreign woman and expresses God’s mercy is for everyone, for all.

Through engagement with the other, it is possible to learn of their human need—that is, that they are not dogs, but humans, who have feelings, who have needs, who have children, who desire mercy and healing like everyone else. Through this encounter, it is possible to see—even if the disciples do not—that we are more alike than different, that we are all children of God. A boundary has been crossed and a mission plan has been changed.

Jesus engages Pharisees, disciples, and Canaanite women, revealing the expansion of the heart of God to include foreigners and outcasts. God is an inclusive God; those we despise are our sisters and brothers too – and God lets us know about that.

We may want to send them away but God brings them near, even to the master’s table. Crumbs are enough for this Canaanite Woman. It may not be what everyone else receives, but she’s grateful for even a little piece of bread—because in the brokenness of that crumb, her daughter finds healing. She fights for a little piece of the dream so that her child’s nightmare can end.

Jesus welcomes her and her daughter—however begrudgingly—despite cultural, religious, and gender differences.

After his conversion – his conversion - because of the Canaanite woman, Jesus can now say, as indeed can we: give me those you consider dogs. Send these to me: the refugee, the alien, the foreigner, and more. Send the wretched refuse, the ailing daughters of ostracised women, because they yearn to be free. The unnamed Canaanite woman reaches out to touch God, to set her daughter free.

This same Canaanite Woman shows the way for Simon-Peter in his confession when answering Jesus' question, "*Who do you say that I am?*", and replies, "*You are the Messiah, the Son of God*".

That was the moment when Jesus turned his face to Jerusalem. That is the story for next week's gospel passage, and it was prompted by the brave and persuasive Canaanite Woman.

The same Canaanite women of our world, in our lives, challenge us, the same as the one who challenged Jesus.

We have the same choice as the disciples to either dismiss her and send her on her way, or we can dismiss our self-imposed boundaries like Jesus, and listen, and inter-act, and change our mind because of her, and offer life not only to her, but also to ourselves and each other.

It could be then, that we may discover even crumbs from under the table can give life and a change of mission focus.

A change of life focus that was offered by the courageous Canaanite Woman who changed Jesus - and us.