

Date: 14th August 2011

Sermon: Rev Dr André Groenewald

Reading: Matthew 15:21-28

Background to the reading

The author of the Gospel according to Matthew wrote the Gospel in a way that engaged with his readers. His readers were Jews who converted to Christendom. And because they were Jews he knew their sentiments and cultural preconceived ideas pretty well. He knew that they would not misuse the Name of the Lord and that they would keep to the commandments of the Law. But, in order for them to understand that Jesus Christ broke and changed the old human made laws, he tells the Gospel story in such a way that it must have shocked them to realise the radical changes of the Gospel.

Our reading is no exception. Jesus went to the Gentile territory of the port cities Tyre and Sidon (today would be parts of Lebanon and Syria). The Jews did not respect the Gentiles. In fact they called them dogs and regarded them as not welcome in the kingdom of God.

Now Jesus finds himself on “unholy, unclean” soil talking to a Gentile woman. In their eyes it was a shameful thing to do! But Jesus does not care. And to make matters even more complicated, this woman was a Canaanite. The Canaanite’s were the most morally despised of Israel’s enemies in the OLD Testament! By now Matthew’s Jewish readers would be on edge.

Then Jesus goes one step further. He uses the old Jewish conversion formula to prove a new point. The Jewish conversion formula stated that Gentile woman could convert to Judaism since the time of Ruth. But in order to determine that their intentions were genuine they had to follow a strict procedure whereby they would go to the priest and ask to be included in Judaism. Three times they would be insulted and rejected and if they returned after the third time the priest would say: “Tradition has prevailed you are now allowed into the Jewish ways!”

In this case Jesus follows the formula with only one change. He also treats her quite rudely by ignoring her at first, then says he is only sent to the Jews and then refers to the fact that it is not right to give the children’s bread to the dogs! She and everyone else knew that Jesus was referring to the practise whereby Gentiles were regarded as “dogs”.

But she remained faithful and after the third time Jesus does not say tradition has prevailed but faith has! Her faith in Him made her come back. And because of her faith in Jesus, her daughter was healed.

The message: Faith can move mountains! Faith can make the impossible possible!

Sermon

The text verse for the sermon: ²⁸ *Then Jesus answered, "Woman, you have great faith! Your request is granted." And her daughter was healed from that very hour.*

I do not think we can look at this text and not be touched by the raw emotions visible between the lines. I mean here is a woman who is desperately seeking help for her daughter who is seriously ill.

It is a well-known fact that the people of the first century Mediterranean world thought of illness in terms of demon possession. These are persons, afflicted with especially severe diseases, either bodily or mentally, (such as paralysis, blindness, deafness, loss of speech, epilepsy, melancholy, insanity), whose bodies, in the opinion of the Jews, demons had entered, and so held possession of them as not only to afflict them with ills, but also to dethrone the reason and take its place themselves.

It really touches the very inside of my own soul. Many of us have experienced the same feeling when our children have been unwell. I for one did not really understand until Nehan was so seriously ill just after his birth. I can just imagine the woman in our reading's sorrow and need to find a cure for her daughter's illness. And then she heard of Jesus.

And really she confesses that He is Lord – the expected Messiah, the only one who can help her. But then Jesus acts like a typical Jewish priest rejecting her claims and ignoring her true needs. But because she has faith in Jesus as the Lord she continues to beg for mercy. Because according to her he is the only One to help and she just pressed on despite the insults. Most probably she must have heard of the strict rules of becoming a Jew. In this case she did not care about tradition, she just believed that Jesus could help her. Even the fact that she is not of one the lost sheep of Israel could deter her. Not even the reference to her as a dog who takes the bread of the children of Israel could stop her.

And then the miracle happens: Jesus looked at her and said her faith had saved her. And from that moment her daughter was healed.

Sometimes we want big miracles to happen to us to convince us of our faith in the Lord Jesus or His presence among us. This week the Holiday Club revisited the salvation story of the Israelites in Egypt and the big miracle that took place when God even opened the sea so that they could walk through on dry land. But there are more miracles that happen every day with us, around us. A miracle happens when we realize that God is present, when He changes situations for the better and according to His will and not necessarily what we would have wanted. A miracle happens when the unexpected occurs in our lives and we are left with only one explanation: it must have been God!

It happens all the time when we ask God to help us and He responds. Yesterday I talked to someone who was quite disappointed in society because someone broke into their car and stole a few things. I then responded saying but still there are so

many things to be thankful about. In the first place they still have their car, they have each other and no one was hurt! A miracle indeed!

But in order for God's miracles to happen, all we need is faith. Faith that there is no other hope than the hope we have in the everlasting kingdom of our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ. Faith that we know that we can trust God – no matter what! Faith that can move mountains! Faith - in the One God who can make the impossible possible.

Faith - that God loves us just as we are. There are so many reasons why this woman was not acceptable according to the Jews: she was a Canaanite, she was unclean and unholy, she was not a Jew - meaning she was not part of God's covenant, she did not keep the commandments of the Law, she was in contact with illness or in their terms "evil spirits" and she was not residing in the Holy Land. But Jesus loved her and had mercy on her situation. Jesus saw further than any human eyes could. He saw her heart!

And this is the power of God's love. He loves us and will keep pressing through His Holy Spirit to change our lives for the better. All we need is to believe and to hold on to His Hand. And if we believe in Him, believe in His Hope and love, then we will also reach out to the strangers, the sinners, the marginalized, and all those people whom we despise!

May we never be discouraged to go to the Lord Jesus when we need Him. May we never think of ourselves as unworthy in His eyes just because people labeled us that way. And may God help you and me to do what a wee girl once did.

She walked with her mother and saw a beggar in rags sitting on the sidewalk. She immediately went over and gave the beggar a hug! Her mother was so shocked and on asking her why, the wee lass responded, if Jesus loves him, so do I...

May be that must be our answer to every human being we meet!

Amen