

## **Faith without borders**

Prior to Covid, crossing state borders in Australia wasn't too interesting. I remember the first time I crossed a state border – I was seven years old, and we'd driven to Queensland. I was very excited at the possibility of travelling interstate – so you can imagine my disappointment that the border was simply a sign by the side of the road.

The most dramatic thing about crossing the border was that the colour of the road markings changed – back then NSW was still using yellow for unbroken lines, but Queensland used white.

I do remember travelling to Tasmania on the Spirit of Tasmania a bit later, where they had sniffer dogs going over the cars to detect fruit or vegetables.

On the whole though, Australian state borders were little more than lines on a map and signs – and bins for fruit – by roadsides.

During Covid, though, that all changed: We had hard borders and border controls. Declarations needed to be made and papers need to be produced to cross some borders.

But in pre-Covid times, crossing borders was routine. We would do it without thinking twice. The laws might have been slightly different, on either side, but for most practical purposes it didn't make much difference.

Today's reading from Matthew's gospel is about crossing a border, as indeed many people of Jesus' time would have done as a matter of routine.

Jesus had left the Jewish dominated area and travelled up the coast to the region of Tyre and Sidon – which was a Canaanite area. It was a big commitment – it was more than 30 miles travel – maybe as much as 50 – on foot. Now there probably wasn't a formal border nor a formal border crossing – or even a sign by the side of the road, but there was very much a border. Travel between the two areas would have been common, but the differences between areas were distinct.

And that sets the scene for a puzzling interaction, between the Canaanite woman, Jesus' disciples and Jesus himself.

Verse 22 tells us that "A Canaanite woman from that vicinity came to him, crying out, "Lord, Son of David, have mercy on me! My daughter is demon-possessed and suffering terribly.""

So we have a non-Jewish woman, approaching a Jewish man – which certainly went beyond the social conventions of the time, calling him "Lord", referring to him as "Son of David" and asking him for mercy – for miraculous intervention to heal her daughter's torment.

That's an awful lot to think about in this verse. Clearly, the linking of "Lord" "Son of David" and "Have mercy on me", goes beyond, for instance, simply recognising Jesus as a person of importance.

The appropriate, polite, address for Jesus as we see elsewhere in the gospels is "Teacher" (Matt 8:19, Matt 12:38, Matt 19:16 etc), but this woman goes beyond that. What she says is

way up there with Peter saying to Jesus “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.” (Matt 16:16)

Back in Israel people had been challenging him to prove he was the messiah with a sign. But here, outside Israel, he meets a woman who is convinced he is the Son of David – the Messiah (though we don’t know how or why) – who calls on him to help her.

*“...have mercy on me! My daughter is demon-possessed and suffering terribly” she says.*

But then we read that 23 [...] he did not answer her at all. And his disciples came and urged him, saying, “Send her away, for she keeps crying out after us.”

Huh? Jesus seems to be ignoring her pleas for help.

And of course, the disciples then urge Jesus to send her away. That’s a little more expected, because we tend to think of the disciples as being a bit slow on the uptake.

In saying “Send her away” they may have been saying “Cure her daughter and send her away”. That’s an interesting take, it’s certainly possible, and reasonably plausible.

And after he seems to have been admonished by the disciples for not sending her away, Jesus does respond:

*He answered, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel.” (15:24)*

Again, Jesus hasn’t addressed her plea for mercy - but he hasn’t exactly turned her down either. And I think it’s important to note Jesus answer isn’t in response to the woman’s plea, but in response to the disciples – look at the text:

*“Send her away, for she keeps crying out after us.” He answered, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel.” (15:23-24)*

Which actually fits in neatly with the suggestion that the disciples were asking Jesus to get rid of her by granting her request and sending her on her way.

But despite the lack of a direct response, the woman doesn’t give up: verse 25 *The woman came and knelt before him. “Lord, help me!” she said.*

And this time Jesus responds to her:

*“It is not right to take the children’s bread and toss it to the dogs.” (15:26)*

So, in effect, he was saying “I have been sent to Israel. It’s not fair to take what is rightfully Israel’s and give it to you”. Which is acknowledging her request, and acknowledging his power to fulfil that request, but saying that fulfilling her request ‘wouldn’t be fair’.

Now, the form of the word ‘dogs’ used here in the original Greek is a diminutive one. So, while we use the same word for ‘scavenging animal prowling the streets’ and ‘family pet’, the Greek doesn’t, and the word that is translated as dog here is at the ‘family pet end of the scale’. The implication we take from it should be more about taking food from a child’s plate and throwing it to the loyal Labrador lounging under the table, than throwing it to the

mongrel lurking outside the window. I understand that that the word Jesus used could fairly be translated as 'Puppies'.

Jesus reference to throwing food to the dogs may not be as bad as it first sounds, but clearly, we don't take food from our children to give to our pets – they may be regarded as members of the family, but they're not – hopefully – as important as children.

Surprisingly, the woman replies "Yes it is, Lord. Even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table." Which certainly puts the dogs Jesus is talking about in the context of pets - the dogs get to eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table.

In most households in Australia, there's plenty of food, and if the odd crumb or crust falls on the table is accidentally brushed off the table, we're not going to eat it. We've got plenty, we don't bother about collecting up every little bit, and if it's been on the floor, well we're not going to eat it or let our children eat it, are we?

We don't want it. Effectively we've rejected it for ourselves: So it can't be unfair to let our dog or cat eat it, can it?

In our house, Dusty the cat quickly swoops on anything that reaches the floor.

When you think about it, if there's something we don't want or we don't want any more of, how can it be unfair to let someone else have it?

And this is how it is with the mercy of Jesus. "I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel," Jesus says – but who is he saying it to, really, do you think? The woman? Or the disciples?

And if the people of Israel lets the crumbs of Jesus' grace fall from their symbolic table, who are they to complain when someone else scoops up those crumbs and claims them for themselves?

Israel doesn't miss out because of the Canaanite woman's claim; her claim is on the mercy of Jesus – mercy that Israel either doesn't claim or doesn't want.

Israel doesn't lose because of what the Canaanite woman gains.

The very next section of Matthew's gospel (15:29-39) tells of Jesus return to Israel, and him miraculously feeding the crowd of four thousand plus women and children with seven loaves and a few small fish.

And those four thousand plus women and children didn't lose Jesus' mercy because he gave it to the Canaanite woman.

Jesus was sent first to the nation of Israel, but his grace is for all. There is no border where Jesus' grace stops.

The Canaanite woman clearly 'gets it' - she understands how this works.

And so Jesus answered her, "Woman, you have great faith! Your request is granted." And her daughter was healed at that moment. (15:28)

So the woman knows. Jesus knows. So why do we have this awkward and the uncomfortable interaction? Why didn't the woman's faith lead instantly to Jesus doing as the woman wished?

I think it's because the lesson of this story isn't for the 'puppies under the table' – the woman and her daughter – and nor is it for the master of the table – for Jesus. The lesson is for the children at the table – the nation of Israel - represented by the disciples.

The disciples, who were Jewish, had to come to terms with the fact that that the salvation that Jesus was bringing wasn't exclusively for the nation of Israel.

And while salvation is available for all, and gentiles are indeed 'allowed in' to the kingdom of God, it is helpful to remember that salvation through Christ has come to us through the nation of Israel. Indeed, the woman gives Jesus the title Son of David.

Going back to the book of Genesis, God made promises to Abraham, that he would become a great nation and also that all nations would be blessed through him.

Paul confirms that in his letter to the Romans (1:16) *"...I am not ashamed of the gospel,"* he writes, *"because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes: first to the Jew, then to the Gentile."*

And we would do well to follow the example of the Canaanite woman.

The Canaanite woman reached out to Jesus not because he was a good teacher, not because he was a good example, but because he was the Son of David – the messiah – the one who she believed could – and would – save her.

Jesus had crossed a physical border to meet her, but she'd also crossed a cultural border to engage with him.

She'd turned away from her beliefs as a Canaanite, and turned to Jesus. She, quite literally, put her trust in Jesus. And her trust isn't simply a vague 'oh, Jesus will make things work out'... but a very powerful statement: She knows the promises of Jesus, and she faithfully – and powerfully – claims those promises.

In the face of ancient traditions, rivalries and hatreds – rivalries and hatreds we can still understand and still see today - she turned away from the accepted ways of the world and turned to Jesus, putting her trust and her hope in him.

And just like the Canaanite woman, people today are called to put their trust not in their traditions, nor in their culture, but in Jesus.

So where do we stand today? Are we like the woman, bravely, faithfully claiming Jesus as our hope? Or are we a bit more like the disciples – knowing Jesus a bit, and sort-of-following him in terms of him being a good teacher and so on, but being a bit annoyed by people like the Canaanite woman? Outsiders, who might distract us from our 'comfortable' faith?

The woman was certainly no less a follower of Jesus than they were, but the disciples urged Jesus to send her on her way. She was different to them in many ways – she certainly would not have fitted in with them, at all.

The Uniting Church brings together a variety of traditions, Methodist, Presbyterian and Congregational and in the more than forty years since union, people of many other traditions have joined our denomination, Anglican, Roman Catholic, Baptist and others. And even people who have come from non-Christian backgrounds.

From all those things, though, what brings us together is faith in Jesus – faith that has no borders - but we can so easily be distracted from that by all kinds of things.

During Covid, we were forced across a border of doing church in different ways: Not physically gathering together, but doing things online or in writing.

We might have missed our familiar ways of doing things, but if we hold that those things are needed to worship God through Christ, then we become like the Pharisees.

And if we start to find someone's zealotry for Jesus a bit of an embarrassment, and start thinking it would be good if he or she was politely, but firmly, sent on their way, then we become a bit like the disciples – Jesus is the nice teacher, the nice example, but Jesus who (we think) doesn't demand too much of us.

We need to remember that the offer of salvation through the death and resurrection of Jesus is for all. That people aren't excluded from that offer because of their race, their socio-economic status, their nationality, their politics, their faith tradition or which side of a state border they're on.

That's not to say that anything goes, because salvation comes through Jesus and only through Jesus. Salvation is dependent on putting our faith and trust in him.

The Canaanite woman, called on Jesus' mercy, the mercy of Jesus as Messiah – the Son of David. Jesus might have crossed a border to speak to her, but she crossed a cultural divide to turn from the faith of her ancestors to turn to Jesus.

And we must step out into territory that is not "ours" just like Jesus did when he ventured from Israel into the Canaanite land. We traditionally focus on bringing people into church, but our emphasis should be on the church going out to people.

In a way, the Covid restrictions made us go out – not into Canaanite country, but into what was a foreign land for many people - the internet.

Jesus words in the book of Acts are clear: *"...you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."* (Acts 1:8)

So let us live out our great faith: let us bravely step over borders as Jesus did – whether they be cultural or political or geographical or technological or traditional – and let each one of us have, and share, a faith that has no borders.

Amen.