



+ This week at Magdalen Road church we continued with our Sunday morning sermon series. We are undertaking a short six-week topical break, seeking to sweep over the Bible and considering the theme of diversity. Too often, too many of our churches are filled with the same kind of person rather than the vibrant diverse multigenerational, multi-ethnic community. Jesus came for all kinds of people. Sometimes we might think that unity necessarily means uniformity.

We noted that at the heart of Oxford, for at least the last thousand years, there lies a fault line- that of town and gown. The University (or universities) has (or have) a complex relationship with the city of Oxford itself. There is a level of symbiosis, but also at times significant antagonism. It's why as a church we long to be a community that is welcoming to both town AND gown, in Christ the dividing wall of hostility has been removed!

This week in our overview of the Bible we focused in on the gospel of Matthew as we considered the life and ministry of Jesus. We noted that it is curious how Matthew contains so many unusual and surprising examples of faith. For a gospel writer who seems to be primarily focused on proving to an audience familiar with the Jewish Scriptures that Jesus is the Messiah, it's perhaps surprising to consider some of the details he records. For example he begins the gospel with a genealogy that highlights a number of Jesus' non-Jewish ancestors - as if he's saying Jesus has a messy family tree that points to the diverse family for whom he came and died. Or as he is later visited by very unusual magi-foreign-astrologers, who come and bow down before him and worship him.

Why is it, that a gospel primarily for the Jewish readership contains so many potential stumbling blocks with such a variety of people? The point is, Matthew recognises God's promise to Abraham (Gen 12 as we saw in week 1) is that his family will be a blessing to the nations. He recognises that Israel was to be a light to the nations (Isaiah 49v6). It is that thread that runs throughout the narrative.

During the sermon we focused in on Matthew chapter 15 verse 21 to 28 as Jesus is approached by a Canaanite woman.

There are number of unusual elements to this encounter-

+ Firstly that she is described as a Canaanite woman. This is a strange description of her ethnicity as this kind of language would not of been common. In Mark (7) she is a Syro-Phoenician woman but as Matthew describes her as Canaanite, this is not a mistake. His description is not so much about her ethnicity but rather it's a theological point. The Canaanites were the enemies of God's people and for her to approach Jesus so this is teaching us something of who Jesus came for.

+ The second particularly unusual aspect as Jesus engages with her is the fact that he seems to refer to her as a dog. This for some is concerning. A closer look though helps us to see what he was getting at. Rather than being any kind of unkind word, this is actually a word of parable. Jesus relates to her how family meals would usually go down. First, the children eat and then the pets! Just imagine if it was the other way round! Well so it is for Jesus' mission, first he has come for the lost sheep - the children - of Israel and then his mission will be to the Gentiles. Hence you see in the Gospels a primary focus on reaching the people of Israel, but then after the resurrection the disciples are released to go to the nations.

Rather than the woman changing Jesus's mind, his response to her elicits a faith and her wisdom and humility mean her request is heard and answered. She engages with him not on the basis of her rights or her goodness but rather in humility before him. We noted three aspects of her conversing with Jesus that act as a model for us:

1. She acknowledges her inability to deal with the suffering of her daughter. She is unable to put it right.
2. She acknowledges who Jesus is. He is the son of David (unusual title to come from a Gentile) she also refers to him as Lord.
3. She humbly comes before him asking for mercy.

We noted that this is a model prayer both for an initial turning to Jesus-I once-in-a-lifetime event. But also a model for a prayer every morning, as we acknowledge that we are unable but that he is able. We come before him not on the basis of our goodness we are Venus but rather that he is good and kind.

This Canaanite woman both stretches our view and understanding of who the gospel is for, but also acts as a model for us as to how we relate to Jesus.

+ Here are some questions to help you understand this account

- Do you think it is fair to say that Oxford is a divided city? Do you see the reality of a town down division? What does that look like?
- Have a look at the census data included with the same group notes what did they tell you about different parts of East Oxford? How do you think they might challenge us as we seek to engage with the neighbourhoods into which the Lord has put us?
- Why do you think this Canaanite woman is included by Matthew in his gospel about Jesus?
- What do we learn about her from these verses? How is she a model for us?