

# Faith and Crossing Boundaries

## **A Canaanite Woman**

**Text: Matthew 15: 21-28 - A Canaanite Woman**

**Mark 7: 24-30 - A Syrophenician Woman**

Prior to the writing of the four Gospels, a tradition of storytelling preserved accounts of the life of Jesus and his teachings. Mark's Gospel is accepted by scholars as the first to be written. It is suggested that the writers of Matthew and Luke depended on the Markan account for part of their work. John's Gospel differs in many ways from the other three Gospels. However the aim of all four Gospel writers was not to create a historical biography of the life of Jesus. It was primarily to proclaim him as the Son of God and the risen Lord and Saviour.

Both stories record the same incident of a Greek woman looking for healing for her daughter and her encounter with Jesus. Mark's Gospel refers to her as the Syrophenician woman. Matthew's Gospel refers to her as the Canaanite woman. The city Tyre where the incident occurred was an ethnically mixed town. It consisted of urban and rural areas and reflected cultural, religious and economic diversity.

The difference in the records of the encounter is attributed to the objectives of the two writers.

**Who was the Canaanite woman?** She was nameless. She was identified by her racial background: Canaanite, Syrophenician. She was considered to be 'unclean' by the Jews because she was a Gentile. She was a mother whose daughter had a long-term mental illness. Since neither reading mentions a family it is safe to assume that she was a single mother. She is the central figure in the story.

Mark presents her as a Gentile woman who challenges Jesus to recognise his mission to those outside the Jewish faith. Matthew presents her as a courageous woman who referred to Jesus as the 'Son of David'. A term that was familiar in the history of Israel.

## **Retelling the Canaanite woman's story.**

What follows is a composite of the two biblical narratives. It is by reading into silences around events and the people in the text that this imagined creative reflection is written.

The Canaanite woman reflects. *You ask me how my daughter was healed? Let me tell you. It was like every other day. My daughter tossed restlessly, half asleep. Her mental illness made her stay in bed rather than getting out of bed. I left the house silently and walked past little villages and farms that dotted the road. As I walked I thought of the reasons for this journey and why I was heading into the township of Tyre. I recalled the many times I had gone searching for healing for my daughter. The pain and sadness that followed each useless journey always brought tears to my eyes. But today I felt it was going to be different. Today I would find the miracle healer who was somewhere in the city. I would not let myself be rejected. I knew that I was a Gentile in the eyes of the Jews and was referred to as being unclean. I had heard that the healer was a Jew who was being called the Messiah by the Jews.*

*I reached the city and began my search. Somewhere, in one of the rich Jewish homes the healer was staying. I asked questions. I listened to people talking and followed anyone who looked as if they could lead me to him. And then I found the house! I walked in unannounced. I saw the healer seated at the meal table. Without any hesitation I knelt respectfully and spoke to him. "Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon." (Matt15:25). The disciples who were present urged him saying "Send her away for she keeps shouting after us." (Matt.15:23). Jesus' response offended me. He claimed "I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel" (Matt.15: 24), I was appalled. Did he not have any compassion for my request for the healing of my daughter? Was he truly a healer or just another arrogant man who would demean a woman, as was the custom?*

*There was no way I would let him get away with his reply. I looked him in his eyes and challenged him. He replied "Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs"(Mk.7 27), "Sir even dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs" ( Mk.7:28) I replied. I held my breath and waited. I had changed the insulting word "dogs" to mean household pets who were not chased away from under the meal table, but were permitted to feed on the scraps that fell from the family table. Jesus replied "Woman, great is your faith. Let it be done for you as you wish" (Matt 15:28). "You may go. The demon has left your daughter." (Mk. 7:29).*

*I turned and ran as fast as I could. Was my daughter truly healed? Words ran through my mind as I ran. 'Faith' – whose faith? The Jewish Healer's faith or my Gentile faith? I ran faster and entered my home. My daughter lay on her bed with joy in her eyes. Tears streamed down our faces. She was truly healed! We now had a future and new life. We never saw the Jewish Healer named Jesus again.*

**PAUSE and reflect:**

How do you think those present at the encounter between the Canaanite woman and Jesus would have reacted?

Would this be regarded as an unacceptable intrusion?

**REFLECTION:**

The Canaanite woman was the outsider in the encounter with Jesus. She broke through the barriers between two races because her need was greater than the rules of society.. She met Jesus as an equal as she argued her case. Her tenacity led to Jesus' change in his attitude to Samaritans.

Who do we think of as outsiders in society today? Are they the migrants who drown as they search for refuge in faraway Europe? Women carrying infants and searching for food and water on the African and Asian Sub-continent? The face of a child on a TV screen who is a victim of abuse?

In a world with blurred borders does the outsider pass unseen on TV screens, the Internet and via social media? In a multi-religious country like ours do we sometimes struggle to find the right words to connect with the outsider so as not to cause offense?

Jesus recognized the boundaries between him and the Canaanite woman – the outsider. She found the words to challenge these boundaries. He recognized that his mission was to both Jews and those who were outside the Jewish faith.

Can faith help us to cross boundaries between race, gender and social differences?

*Give me courage, God,  
to cross the boundaries that divide and fragment communities.*