

Anglican-Lutheran Society Conference

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Bible Study by Bishop Dr Munib Younan

MATTHEW 15:21-28

God of Surprises: Jesus is surprised by the Canaanite Woman

Jesus left that place and went away to the district of Tyre and Sidon. Just then a Canaanite woman from that region came out and started shouting, 'Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon.' But he did not answer her at all. And his disciples came and urged him, saying, 'Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us.' He answered, 'I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.' But she came and knelt before him, saying, 'Lord, help me.' He answered, 'It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs.' She said, 'Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table.' Then Jesus answered her, 'Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.' And her daughter was healed instantly.

GOD OF SURPRISES

I remember a time when I was at Augusta Victoria Hospital on the Mount of Olives, which is owned by the Lutheran World Federation, praying with an elderly Christian patient. As I gave her a blessing, a woman sitting next to her asked, "Please, also pray for my sick granddaughter." But her daughter, the mother of the sick girl, said "No! He is a Christian! Don't ask him for that." For this family was Muslim.

The grandmother replied, "But God hears his prayers! Why shouldn't he pray?" At this time, I really wondered what I should do. I was reluctant. Again, the grandmother vehemently insisted and pulled me with her hand: "Please, pray for her!" Therefore I said that I would do it. She asked me, "Pastor, please pray using the same prayers as you did for that other woman. Pray in the name of Jesus and bless her in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, the One God. No less words than these."

I did just that. After I prayed, the Muslim grandmother seemed pleased and at peace. But the mother of the sick girl continued to protest and resist. "Why?" she said. "Why should a Christian priest pray for my daughter?"

This experience always comes to my mind when I read the story of the Canaanite woman who asks Jesus to heal her demon-possessed daughter. It was really a remarkable thing that a Muslim woman trusted me to pray—and not at all surprising that her daughter had reservations. I could see that the grandmother, though a Muslim, truly believed that our prayer could heal her granddaughter. I believe that this grandmother follows the footsteps of the Canaanite women of our today's Bible Study.

In this Gospel story from the 15th chapter of Matthew, Jesus is teaching and preaching in gentile territory, and he meets a woman who is desperate for healing for her daughter. She calls out, "Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon." At first, Jesus ignores her.

Then the disciples complain about her, seeing her as nothing more than a nuisance. What does a gentile woman want with their teacher? Why is she calling him the Son of David?

This is a story we find repeated often in the church today. All too often, the church draws lines, determining who is “in” and who is “out”, deciding who belongs and who is just a nuisance. We like to see ourselves as inclusive of everyone, but the truth is we often respond to outsiders like Jesus at first did: “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel”(24). We write mission statements and form outreach teams, but we can become so focused on what we think our mission to be, that we don’t even see the ones actually coming to our doors in need of help, in need of embrace, in need of prayer, in need of healing, in need of Good News.

This was the case for Jesus and the Canaanite woman. At first, like the disciples, he only saw her as a nuisance. He understood his mission in one way, to one people! But everything changed when he saw this mother’s faith in him. Jesus was surprised not only by her profound faith, but by her boldness and audacity in asking for what she needed.

And the Canaanite woman was indeed both brave and humble! When Jesus called her “little dog” or a poodle, she could have told him, “I am not a dog! I am not a gentile! I am not a foreigner! I am a woman with a child in need of healing! I am a believer! I am a normal human being with normal needs! One who says such things must not be a man of God. I don’t need you!”

In fact, perhaps this is how any one of us would have responded to Jesus.

But this woman was different. She came to Jesus in faith, never cared for the insult to be called a poodle, and her faith was unshakable. Therefore, she was able to answer in faith, saying, “Yes, Lord, even the little dogs eat the crumbs from the master’s table”(27).

What is this strange encounter all about? It seems to me that this conversation between Jesus and the woman is about a change in Jesus’ mission. St. John says: “He (Jesus) came to what was His own, and His own people did not accept Him” (John 1:11). It’s true that the Jews rejected the Messiah in their land. One could say that they let the bread fall from the table. And yet here is a gentile, ready to receive even a small crumb of what Jesus has to offer. This was a great surprise to Jesus, and to the disciples, and it changed not only his behaviour but also his ongoing mission. He heard her cries, and he recognised her as one of his own. Therefore, in love he looked upon her and said, “Woman, great is your faith. Let it be done for you as you wish”(28). And her daughter was healed instantly.

Today in the church, we really must have a theology of the crumbs. We must read this story and ask ourselves: How great is our faith? Do we have such love for God and such faith in Jesus that we are eager for a few crumbs—or are we waiting for something more before we will trust him? The Canaanite woman is a model of what it looks like to bring all our needs to Jesus’ feet and trust that he will respond.

A theology of the crumbs also means we must understand Christ is not contained in our churches. Christ is not the ownership of the Church. We meet Christ in the ones who come to us from the periphery. We meet him in the ones who come desperate for healing, desperate for even a tiny portion of God’s grace and mercy. A theology of the crumbs is a theology of mission at the margins. Does the church dare to do it? Or do we stay in our comfort zones, not wanting to cross to Sidon and Tyre and meet Canaanites or Syro-Phoenicians or others who are different? Are we afraid of the otherness of the other because of their gender, religion, race, colour, ethnicity, tradition, culture and so on.

Unfortunately, many who come to the church hoping for crumbs find that the church offers them very

little or sometimes nothing at all. Our churches today, like the disciples, often see such people as merely a nuisance. We are too worried about our liturgies, our programs, our procedures, our set of orders, our vestments, our investments, our terms of reference and our buildings, to see the Canaanite woman in her time of need for healing.

And still they come. Still, the rejected and the lost, the lonely and the dying come to us in faith, saying “Give us Jesus! Even a crumb will do! We don’t need protocols or perfect liturgies. We only need healing. We need some Good News today.”

It is always surprising when we find greater faith on the periphery than we do in the pews. But truly, this is where our churches need to concentrate our efforts. The future of the church is not in our buildings, nor in our properties, nor in our bank accounts, nor in our social and political status, nor in the ways we’ve done church in the past or mission in the past. Many synods are having discussions about how to be “inclusive” and how to diversify membership, and yet they continue to do things as usual. Instead, we need to be looking to the margins. We might even learn something!

For example, Christianity is growing fastest today in China and on the African continent, places which once seemed very far off and very far removed from the center of Christianity. Places that were once considered to be our mission fields have become the center of today’s Christianity. According to a Purdue University research, already in 2030 the center of Christianity is no more Europe or the United States of America, but Africa and China. Isn’t this a challenge for us and for our missiological understanding? Are we ready to face that reality? We must move from a post-enlightenment mission mentality and see that these fast-growing churches in Africa and China are not always affected by our Western theology. The center has already shifted—and now it may be that we are the ones who are on the periphery. The theology of the crumbs has already succeeded in Africa and Asia. This is the reason we need to learn from that experience and change our missiological understanding today before it is too late tomorrow. Can you imagine that one day Chinese and African missionaries will come to re-evangelise the former center of Christianity? This means that Christ is present in our world and uses different logics than ours.

Truly, the Canaanite woman is still a challenge for the church today.

Last month the whole world watched while experts from many countries joined efforts to save twelve young boys and their coach lost in a cave in Thailand. It was truly remarkable how the world gathered its expertise and resources to save these children. Why should we pay attention to this story? Because human life is the center of Jesus’ mission. As Jesus said in John 10:10: “I have come that they have life, and have it abundantly.” I can’t help but think of those boys and their coach as being like the Canaanite woman, begging the world: “Help!

Come and save us!” I wonder: what if all the churches today would put their efforts, expertise and funds into saving the lost? What if we allowed ourselves to be surprised, to be challenged, to be transformed by the requests of those coming to our churches and to our countries today? What if we dared to offer more than crumbs to those who come in need? The Church visible unity means that we are all together in mission. We are called together for inclusive mission including prophetic diaconia. The Church visible unity means that we have a common responsibility to heal our broken world.

The refugee crisis in Europe continues to this day, and of course many churches are helping those who are newcomers to this continent. Many of these Churches even dared to challenge their governments who close their borders for the refugees, displaced and migrants. It is heartwarming to hear stories of

churches providing the crumbs of food and shelter, clothing and welcome. Thanks be to God for this faithful witness! They are challenging our understanding.

But I wonder if we could go further. If we came together as followers of Jesus, as communities of faith, perhaps we could offer refugees, displaced and migrants not only crumbs of assistance, but the whole loaf of justice. Perhaps we could use our voices more effectively to counteract growing extremism, populism, and xenophobia. As followers of Jesus, we cannot support arguments from leaders who use the Bible to justify separating children from their parents. We cannot support those who claim Jesus was not a refugee himself, or that refugees are a danger in our countries. Those who are doing so, forget that their respective governments share the responsibility of the conflicts in the countries where refugees are coming from. To say “America first, or Netherlands first, or France first” is a sin! We do not believe Jesus came for only one people. As we see in the conversation between Jesus and the Canaanite woman, Jesus came for every race, every colour, every nation, for every lost one in need of salvation—in other words, for all humankind.

I come from Jerusalem, a city which is seeking justice for all its people. This country, the United Kingdom, shares the responsibility for the continuation of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. Last year, as it was 100 years since the Balfour Declaration, we asked your Prime Minister to offer an apology, but we did not hear any such message. We continue from Jerusalem to cry for justice. We continue to believe that Jerusalem must be a shared city for the three religions namely, Judaism, Christianity and Islam and the two nations namely Palestinians and Israelis. We continue to shout with the Canaanite women: “ Lord help us. Our country is sick and needs healing”. We are asking the world to see us Palestinians as human beings. We Christians are afraid for the future of Palestinian and Israeli children, growing up in such an environment of hatred. For seventy years we have been shouting to the world: “Give us the crumbs of justice!” Still we hear only lip service, and see little action. The propaganda machine, oppression, and occupation seem stronger than peace based on justice.

Even so, we have not given up hope. We know from the story of Exodus that God will hear the cries of the oppressed. This is the reason we continue, like the Canaanite woman, to ask Jesus, “Give us the crumbs of justice!” Her cry is our cry. We hope that the world leaders will hear our cry, and bring hope to a hopeless situation. I promise you, as long as there is a Living God, there is hope. Have mercy on us! Give us the crumbs of justice.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. How is the Canaanite woman a role model for us today? 2 Who are the forgotten ones in your community today? 3 How is your church responding? 4 Does a theology of the crumbs find a place in our churches? 5. What can we learn from people on the margins of society? 6. How can we understand mission at the margins?