

# “Jesus and the Syro-Phoenician Woman”

<b><u>Occasion</u></b>	Evening Service at Therfield Chapel
<b><u>Day, Date &amp; Time</u></b>	Sunday 28 <sup>th</sup> June 2009 at 18:30
<b><u>Basis</u></b>	Mark 7:24-30
<b><u>Reading</u></b>	Mark 7:24-30 Matthew 15:21-38
<b><u>Songs</u></b>	from Mission Praise: 94, 325, 219, 881, 880, 5 from The Source:
<b><u>Author/Speaker</u></b>	Paul Rydon

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Have you ever considered just how Jewish Jesus was?

We all know,  
    if we think about it,  
        that he was a Jew.  
Yet we have so westernised our perception of Jesus  
        that we forget just how Jewish he really was.  
Yet he was in fact Jewish to the core.

It seems that God deliberately chose a devout Jewish couple with whom to raise his son.  
Mary’s song in Luke 1 shows her devotion to God. (Luke 1:46-55)  
    Joseph is clearly open to God’s leading. (Matthew 1:20-22; 2:13,19-20)  
After Jesus was born, on the eighth day,  
    Jesus was circumcised (Luke 2:21)  
    and then they presented him at the temple as required by the law of Moses. (Luke 2:22-32)

Every year Mary and Joseph went to Jerusalem for Passover.  
    And Luke records how one year when Jesus was about twelve years old,  
        he got left behind  
    and his parents found him in the temple  
        listening and discussing with the Jewish teachers. (Luke 2:41-52)

Later in his adult life we find him going up to Jerusalem to the feasts  
    and he was regularly found in the synagogues,  
        listening and teaching.

Yes, Jesus was a Jew through and through,  
    brought up by God-fearing parents.  
    We would expect nothing less.



But on more than one occasion Jesus went against this attitude.

You may recall the incident where Jesus went through Samaria  
and met the woman at the well in John 4.

(John 4:9)

She herself was surprised that Jesus should speak to her  
and John comments that Jews do not associate with Samaritans.

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So what are we to make of this incident in our passage today?

Why Jesus decided to go to the region of Tyre is quite unclear.

Why did he go into non-Jewish territory?

Maybe, he just wanted to get away.

At home, he was opposed by his own religious leaders,  
doubted by his family,

followed by the crowds for all the wrong reasons,

surrounded by disciples who largely did not understand;

yet recognised by the demons

and trusted implicitly by the needy and desperate.

Maybe he needed some space to teach his disciples.

From Mark's account we could be forgiven for thinking that they were not there,  
but Matthew,

one *of* them,

tells us that they were.

Jesus clearly wanted some privacy,

but it was short-lived.

The pace of Mark's account suggests that hardly had Jesus arrived at their lodgings,

but this woman was there.

Matthew tells us that at first Jesus ignored her

and the disciples found her insistence irritating,

and urged Jesus to get rid of her.

Mark, writing to the Roman mind says that she is a Greek,

born in Syrian Phoenicia.

Matthew says she was a Canaanite

a description his Jewish readers would associate with the enemies of the Jews.

She was certainly not a Jew.

In fact, Tyre was part of what was then known as Phoenicia

and under Syrian rule at the time.

Both Tyre and Sidon were pagan cities,

modern and sophisticated for their time

and centres of pagan worship.

We know nothing more about this woman than that she had a daughter

who was possessed by a demon.

Surprisingly she addresses Jesus as Lord, Son of David.

Where did that come from?

How did she know who Jesus was?

It seems that for some reason,  
Jesus is reluctant to meet her needs,  
and even when his disciples persist  
he tells them that his mission is only to the lost sheep of Israel.

Jesus was born as a Jew among Jews.  
His message was for the Jews.  
He was the long promised Messiah,  
who had come from the Father in Heaven to save his people from their sins.

The idea that the Gentiles would also benefit from his work was always there in the background,  
but was only effected after Jesus' death and resurrection  
it only became a reality  
when his followers realised that his message was indeed for the whole world.

But the woman won't go away.

Kneeling before him she pleads, "Lord help me!"  
and begs him to drive the demon out of her daughter.

Jesus response appears rough and demeaning.  
"First let the children eat all they want,  
for it is not right to take the children's bread and toss it to their dogs."

It's interesting that he says 'first' let the children eat -  
suggesting that when they had had their fill  
then the 'dogs' could be fed.

Yet the implication cannot be ignored.  
God's blessings are primarily intended for his covenant people, the Jews,  
to whom he would always keep his promises  
and his side of the covenant,  
and that Gentiles, like this woman,  
commonly called 'dogs' by the Jews,  
were outside the covenant  
and so not entitled to receive the blessings destined for the chosen people of God.  
Maybe eventually, but not yet!

Many modern writers,  
often those whose intent is to undermine Christianity  
express dismay that Jesus should make such a racist comment,  
claiming that in doing so he destroys any suggestion that he is a good man  
and even less that he is the Son of God.

But I think they are too blind to see what is here.  
Jesus was testing the woman with the commonly held position of the Jews,  
who admittedly were a pretty racist lot.

Yet the woman appears un-offended.

Recognising and accepting this position she humbly replies,  
"... but even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs."

God’s blessings always spill over to those who are humbly able to receive them.

Jesus is impressed.

This woman is not one of those who come to Jesus just to get what they want.

This woman has come to Jesus because she believes in Him.

She knows who HE IS!

That is why in Matthew’s account He says that she has great faith,

She puts her trust in the one she knew had the power to help her.

He gladly grants her wish and her daughter is cleansed from her demon.

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This episode is in every sense a forerunner of the Gospel to the Gentiles.

One of the things that always infuriated the conservative Jews was Jesus’ suggestion that the gentiles would also benefit from God’s blessings,

especially if the Jews rejected his message.

You may recall the incident in the synagogue in Nazareth.

Early in his ministry he went home to Nazareth

and read the lesson in the synagogue.

Reading a passage commonly thought to be about the Messiah to come,

he says, “Today this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing”.

They didn’t think too much of that,

as in their eyes he was just a local boy.

But when he reminded them that Elijah was sent to a widow outside of Israel

and that only the Syrian Naaman was cured of his leprosy by Elijah,

they were infuriated

and took him to the top of a cliff and tried to throw him off. (Luke 4:14-30)

The idea that God would bless the Gentile ‘dogs’ was anathema to them.

But, you see, it was never God’s intention to exclude the gentiles from His blessings.

The role of the Jews was to be custodians of God’s law,

yet they demonstrated that they were unable to keep it.

A point which the apostle Paul picks up in Galatians

when he says that “the law was our schoolmaster to bring us to Christ,

that we might be justified by faith.” (Galatians 3:21-25 KJV)

The Jews believed that their salvation was tied up with keeping the law.

And they had good reason to think so from all that we read in Deuteronomy.

But when Christ came he showed another way,

the way of faith.

The law was intended to preserve them on earth,

but it could never satisfy a holy God.

Jesus said that who ever believes on him will have eternal life.

(John 3:16)

To Nicodemus he said, “You must be born again.”

(John 3:7)

Yet even his followers struggled with this after the resurrection.

When Jesus finally left this earth

he told his disciples to go and make disciples of all nations. (Matthew 28:19-20)

From then on there was no question that the gospel was for all,  
but still they had problems.

When Peter stood up on the day of Pentecost and preached to the crowds,

he quoted the prophet Joel:

"in the last days, God says, I will pour out my spirit on **all people**". (Acts 2:17)

And when he has finished and the mortified crowds ask him "What shall we do",

he replies "Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of sins....."

The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off -

***for all whom the Lord our God will call.***" (Acts 2:39)

Bold words,

but how difficult he found it to keep.

It would take a trip to the coast to convince him.

Some time later,

Peter was ministering in a seaside town called Joppa,

One day, he went up on the roof to pray.

(Acts 10:9-10)

Peter was hungry but the meal was not ready.

As he prayed he saw a vision.

A great sheet came down from heaven and in it were all sorts of clean and unclean animals and the voice said, "Arise Peter kill and eat".

But Peter said, "No.

Nothing unclean has ever passed my lips".

This happened three times.

When Peter awoke, but before he had time to understand the vision,

men from the Roman Centurion at Caesarea were knocking at the door  
asking for him by name.

To cut a long story short,

in spite of Peter's initial reticence,

the Centurion and all his household were converted and filled with the holy Spirit

and the Jews with Peter were astonished

that the Holy Spirit should be poured out even on Gentiles.

(Acts 10)

And this is what Peter says:

"I now realise how true it is that God does not show favouritism but accepts men from every nation who fear him and do what is right".

(Acts 10:34)

But it would take the Apostle Paul,

with his special ministry to the Gentiles to establish the Gentile Church.

There would be many conflicts and many debates.

There would be Jewish believers who would try to impose Jewish law on the gentile Christians, but the church survived and grew.

Read Paul's arguments in Galatians and in Romans and try to understand why this was such an issue at the time,  
yet as we Gentiles can now see,  
this is what God intended all along.

It is humbling to see how hard fought our right to salvation has been won.  
Yet we treat it so lightly.  
We behave as though we have a right to the blessings that God is ready to bestow upon us.  
In fact we treat them with a take it or leave it attitude.  
As long as we feel good about our salvation,  
we think that's all that matters.

Yet all that we have has cost dear.  
The work of course was all done by Jesus himself when he died that cruel and painful death on the cross.  
When he was abandoned by his Father and ours,  
and was punished for our sins.  
when he was raised from the dead by the power of the Father  
and was exalted to the right hand of God  
to be our representative in heaven.

We are saved only by him,  
and by no other way.  
Yet others have worked so hard to bring us our salvation.

Christians down through the ages from the apostle Paul  
through all the great missionaries of the church down the centuries,  
who finally brought the message of the cross to these isles.  
To them we owe a huge debt.  
O that we valued it more!

May the Lord himself encourage you and I  
as partakers of God's blessings,  
to respond to him,  
to draw near to him  
and serve him still,  
while we have time.

May each and every one of us  
be humble enough  
to receive God's blessings this evening.

Amen.

Paul Rydon – 28 June 2009