St Peter the Fisherman – Whitianga
Sunday August 20th

Theme: (Matthew 15 The Canaanite woman)

(Video clip)

I runga i te ingoa o te papa, te tama, me te wairua tapu.

*In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.*

*Amen*

*(Black slide)*

It may be helpful to put today’s Gospel reading into context with some other ‘distance-based’ healing exercises Jesus carried out, both to Gentiles and other people on the fringes of society.

(The four healings)

There is the story of the Roman Centurion, who came to Jesus asking him to heal his servant.

Jesus’ comments “Truly I tell you, in no-one in Israel have I found such faith”, were followed by some pretty terse criticisms of the Jews who did not believe in his healing power.

There were the 10 lepers, where only the Samaritan came and thanked him.

There was the haemorrhaging woman who just touched Jesus’ cloak, and the Gerasene man possessed with demons. In each of these cases Jesus showed he was willing to reach out beyond his initial brief of only ‘rescuing the lost sheep of Israel’ to respond to anyone who had real faith in his God-given powers.

(The Canaanite woman)

Today, we have a story of the woman who took courage in both hands, and despite having both ethnic and gender biases against her, was so desperate to have her daughter healed, she was willing to face all the expected barriers of being both a woman and not a Jew. It is a story to which I have always related. As a mother, I understand so clearly how a loving parent will do anything, bear any rejection, face any humiliation, to try to bring help or healing to their child.

So, initially Jesus declined to heal her because, as he said, up to this point he felt his mission was firstly to the Jews, who had strayed far away from the core of their inherited faith. The woman understood and didn’t challenge this. Even so, she stood her ground, (well, knelt her ground) and humbly continued to submit herself to Jesus, asking for His mercy.

(Canaanite woman kneeling)

This little story is essentially built around the conversation between the woman and Jesus. I don’t think this was a chance meeting. It isn’t a stretch to believe Jesus was purposefully going to this Canaanite area, to **this** Canaanite woman, who would become a teaching example to his disciples, of the potential benefit for someone who had true belief in who he claimed to be.

Jesus always had the big picture, the important lesson, in his mind. He was certainly getting quite frustrated with the negative attitudes of the Jews, and especially the Jewish leaders, who were primarily interested in maintaining their positions of power and influence. Jesus needed to get them back to the basics of their faith.

The conversation gives the impression that Jesus was initially not willing to answer the woman’s request because she was a Canaanite. There is obviously something powerful at work in the ethnic dimension of the conversation. What is clear is that the woman was not going to give up, but kept pleading, even from her Canaanite background, so that Jesus recognised her great faith. The contrast is truly striking: in Israel Jesus was trying to convince people he was the Messiah, and was constantly being challenged to prove it with a sign. But here in Gentile territory he met a woman who was convinced he was the Messiah and he could not discourage her efforts. His apparent attempt to put her off was therefore likely a test, and her great faith must have been very gratifying.

(Black slide)

As in so many conversations in which Jesus was engaged, there were clear messages for those who were present – especially the disciples. He was a master in creating opportunities for a broader learning experience than was apparent by a seemingly small incident. What Jesus was doing was typical of the way he dealt with people. He would put hurdles, as it were, in their way to see if they had the faith to step over them. That’s possibly a familiar situation for many of **us**, as we try to negotiate our faith journeys.

The significant point is that Jesus **did** minister to this Gentile woman and praised her faith in the presence of His disciples and the Jewish onlookers.

It is the setting and her words that prompt the disciples, and then Jesus, to respond the way they do. At first Jesus was silent, no doubt to see if she would persevere--and she did, following Him down the street crying out to him. His initial response “I am only sent to the lost sheep of Israel” would explain why he was not agreeing to heal her daughter.

His answer focused on his primary mission in the world. He was the promised Jewish Messiah who came to his own; but when his own rejected him, he turned to the Gentiles. The “lost sheep of Israel” does not mean there were lost sheep in Israel, but that because of its behaviour over the past centuries, all Israel was lost.

Jesus wanted the disciples and the woman to understand fully that His ministry in the brief time He had on earth was very focused. He was the Son of David, the Messiah. That fact did not admit this Canaanite woman to the benefits of the covenant made with the Jews. The kingdom had to be offered to them first, in fulfilment of the Old Testament prophecies. So, all the woman could do is ask for mercy, general mercy, as a non-Israelite.

(Canaanite woman begging)

Well, this woman would not be put off, and knelt before him begging, “Lord, help me.” Jesus pushed her a little further, reminding her of the historic distinction between the cursed Canaanites and the blessed Israelites. In short, saying the Jews are the “children” and the Gentiles are the “dogs.” The children get fed first.

But the woman’s answer is marvellous: ‘even the “dogs” eat the crumbs that the children drop’. She acquiesces to being the role of a “dog” in relation to Israel. She may not be able to sit down at the Messiah’s table and eat with the “children,” but she should be allowed to pick up some of the crumbs they drop. As I said, she would bear any humiliation, any rejection, to save her daughter.  She is certain not only of Jesus’ divine power but also his merciful willingness to use that power to help her. This merciful power is worked by the Holy Spirit, as Jesus comments, “you have great faith!”

(Black slide)

The word for dogs here translates to small dogs, perhaps children’s pets who are harmless and somewhat helpless. This mother accepts Israel’s historical privilege over the Gentiles but will willingly take what the Jews do not want. And that attitude played out again and again later, in Paul’s missionary journeys when he turned to Gentiles because the Jews did not want their Messiah, but the Gentiles did.

Jesus honours the faith that seeks mercy. This desperate mother had no resentment, no anger about her situation; she only knew that Jesus was the Jewish Messiah who came to heal people, and for some reason he was in her town. And this time Jesus responded. Her faith was rewarded.

This can be our story too. Our need for Jesus’ mercy and healing will not necessarily be met as of right. We also may have to undergo challenges, apparent trials, and rejections, humbling ourselves before Him. We have no entitlement coming our way. But we do have the chance to kneel before him and ask, carrying the faith that if our need has value, then that faith will be rewarded.

(Final group slide)

Just as it was for the Centurion, the leper, the haemorrhaging woman, the Gerasene man and the Canaanite woman.

Amen

The vision of a kingdom that included Jews and Gentiles was part of Jesus’ plan from the very beginning of His ministry.