

LOOKING AHEAD: SUNDAY AUGUST 20th

Reading: Matthew 15: (10 – 20) 21 – 28 [Tenth after Pentecost]

Jesus' encounter with the Gentile woman in foreign Syro-Phoenician territory presents those seeking to understand and interpret scripture with one of their greatest challenges. Middle Eastern scholar Kenneth Bailey in his "*Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes*" comments that "*this story is often viewed as a troubling embarrassment. A sincere foreign woman seeks help from Jesus. At first he ignores her. He then appears to exhibit racism and insensitivity to her suffering as he insults her in public ... Why, the reader inevitably asks, is this poor woman 'put through the wringer' before Jesus accepts to exorcise the demon from her daughter?*" [page217].

Ours is not to rescue or redeem the Gospel stories. Their incongruence and contradictions are worthwhile and living challenge to the reader. But various attempts are made by scholars to explain this text. Some like to say that clearly Jesus had the occasional 'bad' day every now and then, with strong consequences about our understanding of his humanity. Bailey (above) argues that, in a dual word-play with the woman and his disciples at one time, Jesus, fully aware of what he is doing, uses the occasion to address (and correct) what he knows are his disciples' pre-conceptions. An Iona Community worship resource rendition of the story titled "Jesus: Racist or Redeemer" delightfully notes of the exchange between Jesus and the woman, "*there as a twinkle in the eye that the others present did not see.*" Possibly. But I rather think that some things are sacrificed in the telling for the sake of other purposes, overlooking things that remain to strike alarm in the modern reader.

We need to relate this story to the rest of this chapter. Jesus has been challenged by the Pharisees as to why his disciples "*do not keep the tradition of the Elders*" [verse 1]. He re-interprets their teachings (thus challenging their religious authority) in talking about "*what really defiles a person.*" [verses 10-20]. After that, Jesus has deliberately withdrawn to escape the looming threat of the Pharisees.

It is noteworthy that the Lectionary offers us the additional verse 10 – 20 of Matthew 15 with this story, in which Jesus accounts to his disciples for his challenge to the religious leaders about purity rules and what actually makes for uncleanness. In his First Thoughts on the Gospel Passage from the Lectionary, Bill Loader, Emeritus Professor of New Testament at Murdoch University in Perth notes that, "*The passage in brackets belongs to a larger section, 15:1-20, in which Matthew revises Mark 7:1-23. There Mark had used an anecdote about controversy over washing hands ritually before meals which had become a vehicle for a general attack on the validity of outward observances, such as washing and observation of food laws*". However, we know of Matthew's Gospel that it was recorded for a largely Jewish synagogue congregation of the early church. The traditions that inform Matthew's community seek to accommodate Jewish followers. Loader continues, "*Matthew is happy to take over the passage, but removes all elements of ridicule and especially the implication noted by Mark in 7:19 that Jesus effectively declared all foods clean. How could Matthew say such a thing in his strongly Jewish congregation and how could he say such a thing having affirmed that Jesus had not come to abolish even the slightest detail of God's Law in scripture?*"

What we have here is an outstanding example of verbal engagement, which Malina and Rohrburgh in their "Social Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels" term 'challenge and riposte'. They note the cultural love of such 'one-up-manship'. Still today Jewish debate in the Torah schools is believed to lead into truth. However, Eugene M Boring, quoting Sharon Ridge in the New Interpreter's Bible Commentary, notes that "*the exchange between Jesus and the woman reverses the pattern usually found in such stories, Usually a situation or event provokes a hostile question from some onlooker to Jesus, to which Jesus responds with a correcting or reproving question and then drives home his point by a concluding statement which the opponent would be hard put to deny. In this story, however, it is Jesus*

who provides the hostile saying and the woman whose retort trips him up and correct him” [Sharon Ringe, quoted, page 336, [Commentary on Matthew](#)]. Here is my earlier point about detail being sacrificed for an overall outcome. In this too, the woman has exhibited an accepted and respected ascendancy.

Noteworthy too is the woman’s language. She cries, *“Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David”*. Boring (above) notes that this is *“all Christian confession reflecting the liturgy of the Church”*. Its use is suggestive that this is a story with wider application, including in the life of early Christian communities.

For Matthew , and noting the foregoing discussion, it is entirely consistent for his Jesus to maintain that he had come *“only to the lost sheep of Israel”* (verse 24) [This had been the terms of mission in the Gospel earlier in 10: 5,6]. As Loader (above) writes, *“Matthew would have had difficulty portraying Jesus’ actions at this stage as representing openness to Gentiles because that commission comes only after Easter (28:18-20)”*.

In the end, the woman is commended for her faith and her petition for her daughter granted. And note – this is a theme of Matthew’s story. In the previous chapter, Peter on the sea of Galilee amidst the tempest of a storm, is questioned for his lack of faith. Ultimately, the woman expresses persistent and ‘true’ trust in Jesus as able to heal her sick daughter. Loader [above] says, *“We should read this story from its end, not its beginning. Seen from its end it becomes a celebration of inclusion of women and of Gentiles”*. The detail that gets us there is able to be stood aside to reach this hopeful conclusion.

Taken in context as illustrative of the rest of the chapter’s issue of what makes for holiness, the woman’s example supplies the answer. Faith. Trusting faith. Eugene Boring’s Commentary in the New Interpreter’s Bible Commentary includes the following summary: *“Christians of every generation need to see themselves as belonging to a community called to holiness, and to ask what in our time violates this holiness and nullifies the church’s witness. There will be debate on this issue just as there was in Matthew’s situation, but it is an issue worth debating, and inherent in the vocation to be God’s people in a secular and pluralistic world – which as such is still God’s world”* [[Commentary on Matthew](#), page 335].

THEMES: Faith, inclusion,