



## The Faith of the Canaanite Woman (Mt. 15.21-28): Narrative, Theology, Ministry<sup>1</sup>

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### ABSTRACT

Matthew's story of the Canaanite woman is an unusual and disturbing story in the Gospel tradition. Alongside other Gentile stories in Matthew's very Jewish Gospel, it signifies the opening of the doors on the Gentiles and their inclusion in the community of faith. The woman's language and the silence of Jesus speak powerfully to the contemporary context within Anglicanism. The liturgical language she employs teaches us how to speak in worship, while Jesus' silence addresses our own experience of suffering and the seeming deafness of God. In the end, the narrative, for all its exegetical difficulties, is a powerful story of communion and the ultimately gracious response of God. As Anglicans we need to recover the depths of our own speech, grounded in Scripture and the Book of Common Prayer, as expressions of the grace of an inclusive God who teaches us how to speak and how to wait in faith.

KEYWORDS: ministry, Kingdom, righteousness, mercy, women, Gentiles, otherness, language

### *Introduction*

Jesus' encounter with a Gentile woman whose daughter is demon-possessed in Matthew's Gospel is a difficult and challenging story that, for all its ambiguity, possesses a unique theological force. As Anglicans,

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it challenges our response to the 'outsider'; it demonstrates the need to allow our language, in theology and liturgy, to be shaped by the gospel; and it addresses contemporary situations of suffering and conflict where God seems mute. The Canaanite story raises issues that continue to engage the Church's ministry and, without definitively resolving them, shows the life-giving connection between divine love and human faith, even in contexts of alienation and division.

The story is part of a long section concerned with Jesus' ministry in and around Galilee (Mt. 4.12–16.12) before he begins the journey to Jerusalem (16.13–20.34). Within this broader section a smaller unit, held together by images of bread and eating (14.1–16.12), is dominated by the two feeding narratives (14.13–21; 15.29–39). The bread imagery encompasses other themes in this section of the Gospel and has literal and metaphorical meaning, signifying the eschatological blessings of the Kingdom of Heaven. The way in which Jesus feeds, heals and walks the seas reveals his identity as the Son of God. More immediately, Jesus reformulates the meaning of clean and unclean in relation to food (15.1–20), transforming it from the ritual to the moral, thus giving access to 'unclean' Gentiles.<sup>3</sup> The story parallels that of the healing of the centurion's servant (8.5–13) and the exorcism of the Gadarene demoniacs (8.28–34), all three being Gentile healings, whereas the sick who approach the Matthean Jesus come generally from within Israel (e.g. 14.14, 35–36; 15.30–31).<sup>4</sup>

### *The Story as Narrative*

The exorcism of the Canaanite woman's daughter is an unusual miracle story in the Gospel tradition. It is edited by Matthew in a manner that, if anything, intensifies the seeming offensiveness of the Markan original (Mk 7.21–28). Typical of Matthew's redaction of the miracles, it focuses attention on the dialogue between Jesus and the suppliant, omitting extraneous detail.<sup>5</sup> Like other Matthean

3. See C.S. Keener, *The Gospel of Matthew: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), p. 414.

4. F.T. France is unusual in interpreting the episodes following the Canaanite story as centred on Gentiles and Gentile territory, including the second Feeding miracle (*The Gospel of Matthew* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007], pp. 591–92); he tries to argue that those who, after their healing, praise 'the God of Israel' are more likely Gentiles than Jews (15.31). This seems more of a Markan insight than a Matthean one (cf. Mk 7.37–8.10).

5. For further on Matthew's redaction of the miracles, see H.J. Held, 'Matthew as Interpreter of the Miracle Stories', in G. Bornkamm, G. Barth and H.J. Held,

miracle stories, the stress is on Jesus' final response of compassion and the power of his word, as well as the faith of the one in need. Although Matthew has not abbreviated this story, as he has with other Markan miracles, he has given characteristic emphasis to these core themes. In Matthew's miracles, the power of Jesus' healing love, here and elsewhere, is matched by the suppliant's irrepressible faith.

The story is carefully structured as an exorcism, a common element of Jesus' ministry in this Gospel (4.24; 8.28-34; 9.32-34; 10.8; 9.32-34; 12.22-32, 43-45; 17.14-21). It revolves around three parallel requests and responses, mostly initiated by the Canaanite woman and one by the disciples; these are followed by a further request and response. The dramatic tension increases throughout the exchanges, making Jesus's final response, which departs significantly from the form, the more remarkable:<sup>6</sup>

<i>Unsuccessful request</i> of woman (22): 'have mercy'	A
<i>Response</i> of Jesus (23a): silence	
<i>Unsuccessful request</i> of disciples (23b): 'send her away'	B
<i>Response</i> of Jesus (24): only lost sheep	
<i>Unsuccessful request</i> of woman (25): 'help me'	A <sup>1</sup>
<i>Response</i> of Jesus (26): children's bread	
<i>Successful request</i> of woman (27): 'even the dogs'	C
<i>Response</i> of Jesus (28): 'let it be to you'	

The opening verses set out the tensions of the narrative (Mt. 15.21-22). Jesus' purpose in journeying into Gentile territory is unspecified, though it does not rule out the possibility of ministry.<sup>7</sup> It may be in part to

(F'note continued)

*Tradition and Interpretation in Matthew* (ET; London: SCM Press, 2nd edn, 1982), pp. 165-299. Three characteristic features of Matthew's redaction are condensation, christological focus and restructure (W.D. Davies and D.C. Allison, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to Saint Matthew* [Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1991], II, p. 32). On the narrative aspects of the miracles, see U. Luz, *Studies in Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), pp. 221-40.

6. See Davies and Allison, *Saint Matthew*, II, p. 541; also E.M. Wainwright, *Towards a Feminist Critical Reading of the Gospel according to Matthew* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1991), pp. 217-22, and G.S. Jackson, 'Have Mercy on Me': *The Story of the Canaanite Woman in Matthew 15.21-28* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002), pp. 101-02.

7. According to Davies and Allison, it is not entirely clear whether Jesus journeys *towards* the Gentile territory of Tyre and Sidon or *into* it (*Saint Matthew*, II, p. 548); for the contrary view, which follows the more usual meaning of the Greek

escape the hostility of the scribes and Pharisees,<sup>8</sup> but Jesus shows no desire to remain hidden and unrecognized (as at Mk 7:24). Indeed, Matthew has already designated the two pagan cities of Tyre and Sidon as more likely to repent than certain of the Galilean towns which are the centre of Jesus' ministry (Mt. 11.21-22). Along with the ambiguity of Jesus' presence in alien territory, the dramatic tension is heightened by the designation of the woman's ethnic identity as 'Canaanite' (Mt. 15.22a), an archaic description that evokes Israel's ancient enemies,<sup>9</sup> recalling 'traditional prejudices' (cf. Mk 7.26).<sup>10</sup> The woman thus appears on the scene as a potentially hostile outsider.<sup>11</sup> Given this evocation, it is striking that, in daring to request healing for her demonized daughter,<sup>12</sup> the woman uses insider language, language found elsewhere in Matthew only on the lips of the people of Israel (cf. 9.27; 17.15; 20.30).<sup>13</sup> [s]he speaks to Jesus in the biblical language of the Psalms, that is, in the language of prayer with which the church is familiar.<sup>14</sup> The woman's awareness of Jesus' identity is equally surprising: she recognizes and acknowledges him as embodying 'the God of Israel' (15.31).

Jesus' silent response to the woman's desperate plea is one of the enigmas of the narrative (15.23a). At an ethnic level it may seem comprehensible: the woman represents the traditional adversaries of

(*F* note continued)

preposition *eis* ('into'), see, e.g., U. Luz, *Matthew 8-20: A Commentary* (ET; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), pp. 338-39.

8. France notes that Jesus is withdrawing until he begins the real confrontation, with the journey to Jerusalem (*Matthew*, pp. 591, 596-603).

9. See Jubilees 20.22-24; Josephus describes the Tyrians as 'notoriously our bitterest enemies' (*Contra Apion*, I.70 [LCL; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1976]). On Canaanites in the Old Testament as 'villains', see Jackson, *Have Mercy on Me*, pp. 70-82.

10. Davies and Allison, *Saint Matthew*, II, p. 547.

11. Arguing from a social-scientific perspective, S.L. Love thinks that, lacking male protection or escort and probably means of subsistence, the woman was likely to have survived by prostitution (*Jesus and Marginal Women: The Gospel of Matthew in Social-Scientific Perspective* [Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2009], pp. 152-55). This assumption goes well beyond the Matthean text.

12. With the suggestion of a continuous plea (note the imperfect tense of the verb, *krazō*).

13. M.E. Boring, 'The Gospel of Matthew: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections'. in L.E. Keck *et al.* (eds), *The New Interpreter's Bible* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1994), p. 336.

14. Luz, *Matthew 8-20*, p. 339. Jackson singles out a number of psalms that have influenced Matthew here, particularly those of lament (*Have Mercy on Me*, pp. 111-26).

Israel and, by implication, Israel's God. She is a pagan outsider, who does not belong within the chosen, covenant people of God. At another and deeper level, however, she is a suppliant in need, and the language she uses is both insightful and appropriate. To such people, even Gentiles, the Matthean Jesus has shown compassion and power. Indeed, throughout this section of the Gospel, the theme of Jesus' readiness to rescue and save the needy has been reiterated; after the Sabbath controversies Matthew has spoken of Jesus as the one in whom 'the Gentiles will hope' (12.21, quoting Isa. 42.1-4 LXX). As readers, we are mystified by the silence, as well as disturbed by the tensions of the narrative.<sup>15</sup> Is Jesus rejecting the woman's request, is it a delaying tactic on his part, or does his reticence have another object in view, not yet apparent to the reader?

The ambiguity of Jesus' response to the woman continues in the second unsuccessful request of the narrative. The disciples find the woman an irritant and an embarrassment (15.23b); they want the situation immediately resolved, possibly by Jesus' granting of her request.<sup>16</sup> Yet, despite their request and his initial silence, Jesus does not dismiss the woman; his response is far from being a simple rebuff.<sup>17</sup> Rather, he sets out the limitations of the ministry he has given the Twelve, where only 'the lost sheep' of Israel are to be gathered in (10.5-6; the 'tax collectors and sinners', 9.10-11; 11.19). But if these are the limitations of his ministry, why does he not at once dismiss the woman? He has, moreover, already envisaged a day when 'many will come from east and west, and recline at table' with the people of Israel (8.11), a day when he will feed not only Jews but also Gentiles.

It is another remarkable feature of this story that the woman is not rebuffed, but on the contrary approaches Jesus directly and falls at his feet (15.25a). In Matthew's context, the woman's action recalls the Magi who have paid homage to Jesus (2.11), and anticipates the homage accorded the risen Christ (28.9, 17) who holds cosmic, divine

15. For Matthew, it is unlikely that Jesus' silence is the expression of his annoyance at being discovered (though it is a possibility in Mark's version).

16. So France, *Matthew*, p. 593; as against D. Senior, *Matthew* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1998, p. 181), who thinks the disciples show no interest in the woman's daughter being healed. The NJB is unusual in translating it: 'Give her what she wants, because she keeps shouting after us.' The verb *apoliuō* ('dismiss/send away') is used in the Feeding stories of Jesus sending the crowds home after the miracle (14.15, 22; 15.32, 39; cf. 18.27), suggesting the disciples do want the woman's plea granted – though their motives are far from pure.

17. Davies and Allison, *Saint Matthew*, II, p. 550.

sway (cf. 4.8-10). These significant cross-references may even suggest the offering of worship on the part of the woman to the one who is 'Lord',<sup>18</sup> the only one able to heal and save. With her poignant plea, 'Lord, help me!' (15.25b), Jesus turns and addresses her for the first time. Though breaking his silence, his response nonetheless sets her as much at a distance as ever (15.26) and is astonishing, given his refusal to dismiss her. Now, though negatively, he begins to engage her; silence is replaced with slighting speech. Using an everyday metaphor from the household,<sup>19</sup> Jesus challenges her directly, comparing the people of Israel as children to the Gentile outsiders as dogs.<sup>20</sup> The image of bread connects this story to the wider Matthean narrative, and particularly the two Feeding stories where the benefits of salvation belong, first and foremost, to Israel.

Astonishingly to modern ears, the woman's response betokens no sense of injury or rejection (15.27). She accepts the metaphor on its own terms. Conceding that what Jesus says is strictly accurate, and thus acknowledging the primacy of Israel, she uses the imagery to score a decisive point: even the dogs, who are also part of the household, are permitted to eat the leftovers. Her riposte demonstrates a quickness of wit, as well as a faith that is 'profound and tenacious',<sup>21</sup> contrasting with the wavering of Peter's faith on the water in the previous chapter (14.30-31).<sup>22</sup> The woman accepts Jesus' imagery and tosses it back to him, winning the argument in this metaphorical exchange. She is not requesting the children's food, but is only asking for the leavings.

18. D. Hagner, *Matthew 14-28* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson), 1995 p. 442, translates the verb here as 'worship'. See also Boring, 'Matthew', p. 336 who speaks of the woman using 'the kneeling posture of Christian worship'.

19. The diminutive does not mean 'little dogs' but household dogs as opposed to stray dogs (of which there were many in the ancient world). See A.H. Cadwallader, *Beyond the Word of a Woman: Recovering the Bodies of the Syrophenician Women* (Adelaide: ATF Press, 2008), pp. 87-139, on the use of the diminutive (which he sees as far more demeaning) and the Greek origins of the proverb.

20. G.D. Miller goes against the trend that assumes dogs in the Israelite world were regarded as contemptible, without value or usefulness; he argues instead that some were used as working animals (e.g. sheepdogs) and some even kept as pets within Israel (e.g. Tob. 6.2; 11.4); in general, however, dogs were more highly valued in the surrounding nations than in Israel ('Attitudes towards Dogs in Ancient Israel: A Reassessment', *JSNT* 32 [2008], pp. 487-500).

21. Senior, *Matthew*, p. 182.

22. See Senior, *Matthew*, p. 183 and Hagner, *Matthew 14-28*, p. 442.

For Matthew, the accent is on the woman's faith, as is characteristic of his miracle stories.<sup>23</sup> The vocative particle 'O' ('O woman') indicates the depth of that faith, suggesting that Jesus is deeply moved by it (15.28a). His word of assent in this final step in the pattern of request-response is transformed into a gracious, affirming word, in contrast to his previous responses. It parallels Jesus' astonishment at another Gentile's faith (8.10), although nowhere else in Matthew is a person's faith described as 'great'. In granting the woman's desire, the daughter is made well at the moment of Jesus' fiat – 'let it be to you ...' – the creative power of his word operating, as with the centurion's servant, at a distance (8.8, 13).<sup>24</sup> In this conclusion, the tensions of the story are resolved. A female Gentile has bettered Jesus in debate, winning praise for her faith and healing for her daughter. She has spoken the right words, words which burst open a door once closed. The strength of her faith and intercession is accredited as a cause of her daughter's healing.<sup>25</sup> She has come 'from the east and west' and been given a foretaste of that day when she and other Gentiles will 'recline at table with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the Kingdom of heaven' (8.11). Here the emphasis lies, not so much on the action (15.28b), but on the final, unexpected turn the dialogue takes, out of which the healing flows.<sup>26</sup>

Throughout the narrative, Matthew gives no explicit indication of whether the story indicates a change of heart on Jesus' part,<sup>27</sup> or whether it is a test of the woman's faith.<sup>28</sup> It certainly authenticates the woman's faith, though whether intended by the Matthean Jesus is not made plain. His initial responses to the woman's plight serve not to discourage but to strengthen faith, and to distil it into three evocative words, 'Lord, help me!' (*Kyrie, boêthei moi*). She responds with the

23. Held, 'Matthew as Interpreter', pp. 178–81, and Boring, 'Matthew', pp. 241–51.

24. Jesus' initial response to the centurion, if a question (as is likely), may also be something of a rebuff: 'Do you expect me to come to your house?' (8.7); so Davies and Allison, *Saint Matthew*, II, pp. 21–22, and France, *Matthew*, pp. 312–14.

25. This point (along with the woman's humility) is a key emphasis of the early Fathers; see M. Simonetti (ed.), *Matthew 14–28* (ACCS; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002), pp. 30–31.

26. Boring, 'Matthew', p. 336.

27. So G.R. O'Day, 'Surprised by Faith: Jesus and the Canaanite Woman', in A.-J. Levine (ed.), *A Feminist Companion to Matthew* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001), pp. 114–25, and D. Senior, 'Listening to the Voices', *Bible Today* 28 (1990), pp. 361–63.

28. France sees this as a testing narrative (*Matthew*, pp. 590–91), with Jesus challenging not just the depth but also the authenticity of the woman's faith.



simplicity of need and faith, just as do the disciples in the storm at sea, with three – in Greek – simple words: ‘Lord, save, we perish!’ (*Kyrie, sôson, apollumetha*, 8.25). This turning to Jesus with the irrepressible language of hope and longing is the response of true disciples to threat, danger or distress; the words themselves, even when they involve perseverance, are truthful, efficacious and ultimately salvific. The Canaanite woman in her need, her courageous refusal to be rebuffed and her manner of discourse becomes the model of discipleship:<sup>29</sup> one who triumphs over adversity to find – through seeking, tenacity and right speech – her desire granted and her need fulfilled. The fact that the adversity comes from Jesus himself, in the first three exchanges in the narrative, only emphasizes the positive outcome of the last exchange.

In modern sociological and psychological terms, Jesus’ reaction to the woman is cruel and unfeeling and, from this perspective, depicts Jesus in the most unflattering of terms.<sup>30</sup> But this is not a psychological narrative, and such a reading potentially involves a serious genre error.<sup>31</sup> Rather, it is a stylized and highly structured narrative, a classic genre narrative. The literary pattern involves three negative responses, setting up expectations of a refusal, while the fourth unexpectedly resolves the anomalies, ambiguities and contradictions of the first three.<sup>32</sup> In such a

29. D. Patte sees both Jesus and the woman, read from within different contexts, as models for disciples to emulate (‘The Canaanite Woman and Jesus: Surprising Models of Discipleship [Matt. 15:21-28]’, in I.R. Kitzberger [ed.], *Transformative Encounters: Jesus and Women Re-viewed* [Leiden: Brill, 2000], pp. 33–53).

30. F.W. Beare, *The Gospel According to Matthew* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1981), p. 242, sees Jesus’ attitude to the woman as brutal, representing ‘the worse kind of chauvinism’. In a similar vein, e.g., see J.M.C. Scott, ‘Matthew 15.21–28: A Test-Case for Jesus’ Manners’, *JSNT* 63 (1996), pp. 21–44, and A. Monro, ‘Alterity and the Canaanite Woman: A Postmodern Feminist Theological Reflection on Political Action’, *Colloquium* 26 (1994) pp. 32–43, who both argue that the woman plays the role that should be taken by Jesus; also L.A. Guardiola-Saénz who sees the woman as victimized and oppressed even by Matthew (‘Borderless Women and Borderless Texts: A Cultural Reading of Matthew 15:21–28’, *Semeia* 78 [1997], pp. 69–81).

31. Boring, ‘Matthew’, p. 337. L.D. Hart sees Jesus operating here as the Sage, awaiting the right moment to lead the woman into a new spirituality, a new way of being (‘The Canaanite Woman: Meeting Jesus as Sage and Lord’, *ExpT* 122 [2010], pp. 20–25).

32. Triads are a characteristic feature of Matthew’s rhetorical style. In the Sermon on the Mount, however, the three classic observances of righteousness (almsgiving, prayer and fasting) have a fourth added to them (treasure in heaven)



reading, Jesus' initially negative rejoinders are best seen as a narrative device that heightens the oppositions and ambiguities of the story. Interpretation of the passage needs to be determined by the literary genre rather than a socio-psychological hermeneutic that, being anachronistic, tends to misread the archaic style and genre. The literary structure, in turn, needs also to be interpreted in light of Matthew's Christology, where Jesus is the lowly and beloved Son who reveals the face of God and lives out authentically God's righteousness (3.13–4.11; 11.29; 17.5).<sup>33</sup>

The subtleties of the story, read in its own terms, thus suggest a deliberation on the part of the Matthean Jesus and a change of direction in the wider narrative of the Gospel. In the tension between awareness of the woman's inimical status, and knowledge of the earlier confines of the disciples' mission and of Jesus' previous healing of Gentiles, the implied reader finds in Jesus' final response, not only a resolution but also a sense of communion that presages the future. Like the Parable of the Labourers in the Vineyard (Mt. 20.1–15), there is an overturning of expectations at the end. The last has become first and the outsider an insider, surpassing the insiders with the quality of her faith (20.16). The unclean alien shows herself receptive to grace, opening the way for others like her: by the doggedness of her faith, her sharpness of wit, her depth of understanding, and the aptness of the words she employs. Her story is not simply that of an individual but also possesses a representative quality. With her use of covenant language and awareness of Israel's priority, the woman proves herself friend, not enemy, and widens the communion of God's covenant people. From a narrative viewpoint, this story represents a boundary-crossing moment in the Gospel of Matthew. Jesus' journey into enemy territory invites precisely the change of direction which his ministry now takes. Outsiders knock on Israel's door and the door is opened to them; they are now welcome at the table. The Gentiles too belong among the 'lost sheep'.<sup>34</sup>

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that sums up the rest (6.1–34). The same pattern of three-plus-one can also be found in Old Testament rhetoric: cf. the opening series of prophecies in Amos 1.3–2.8.

33. In its present form, the story is also loaded with the subsequent history of the Matthean community and the early Church in relation to the place of Gentiles and also the ministry of women.

34. So L. Nortjé-Meyer, 'Gentile Female Characters in Matthew's Story: An Illustration of Righteousness', in Kitzberger, *Transformative Encounters*, pp. 67–71.

*The Story as Theology*

The story of the Canaanite woman functions as theology and ministry, where both are closely aligned. The most striking theological aspect of the story is its challenge concerning the place of the outsider, the stranger, the enemy.<sup>35</sup> Acceptance of the unclean 'other' is fundamental to Matthew's theological vision. The perfection of love is evidenced in love of the enemy, as Matthew's sixth antithesis makes plain (5.43-48). This theme is tied to the central place of forgiveness in Matthew, which is foundational to Christian community (18.21-35). The Church is to be an all-encompassing community, manifesting a communion of love and mercy to all, regardless of status or merit. Love of the enemy is the highest and most radical manifestation of righteousness in Matthew's Gospel.

Matthew's moral vision, moreover, is grounded in a specific theological and christological understanding of God. Disciples are to embrace the vision and practice of righteousness because of who God is – making 'his sun rise on the evil and the good, and his rain to fall on the just and the unjust' (5.45). The same characteristics lie at the heart of Jesus' identity and his proclamation of the *basileia*, the reign of heaven. Jesus' ministry is carried out in righteousness and goodness, obedience, humility and love. In the end, he does reflect the indiscriminate and reconciling kindness of God, showing mercy to the unclean woman and restoring the health of her (equally unclean) daughter. As the Son of God and Emmanuel (1.23), the incarnate presence of God, he reveals here and elsewhere a deity who is merciful, loving, forgiving – first to the chosen people and finally to all. In this sense, the Matthean Jesus makes it possible for disciples to follow the path he forges. He is not only a model to be imitated, but a Saviour who empowers disciples to live a transformed life in communion with others.<sup>36</sup> Through life and death, Jesus fashions a

35. Luz sees two basic dimensions to the story in the history of interpretation: salvation-history (the relationship of Jew and Gentile) and the parenetic-existential (faith) (*Matthew 8–20*, pp. 337–38). For a rather different history of reception, cf. L.J. Lawrence, "Crumb Tails and Puppy-Dog Tales": Reading Afterlives of a Canaanite Woman', in C.E. Joynes and C.C. Rowland (eds.), *From the Margins 2: Women of the New Testament and their Afterlives* (Sheffield: Phoenix Press, 2009), pp. 262–78.

36. The Temptation story makes the point in its primary, christological meaning: Jesus replays the story of Israel and makes possible the 'new covenant', restoring what was lost, and remaking human history (Mt. 4.1-11); see U Luz, *Matthew 1–7: A Commentary* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007), pp. 153–55.

new covenant, a new pathway, a new hope for Israel and for the Gentile world (26.27-29).

The Christology underlying the Canaanite story is most clearly enunciated in the apocalyptic vision at the end of the fifth discourse (25.31-46). Here the Son of Man, exalted in splendour and glory, sits on the throne of judgment surrounded by the angels and the nations of the world; it is an image of the risen Jesus, the Jesus of the *parousia* (25.31-32). Yet this triumphant and elevated Christology is paradoxically allied to a very different image: the same majestic figure is also to be found among, and identified with, the poor, the estranged, the needy and the imprisoned (25.35-36, 42-43). Indeed, final judgment is based not on how the nations have responded to the Christ of majesty but how they have ministered to Christ the stranger, Christ the poor and needy, Christ the prisoner. For Matthew, while Jesus may appear to set the needy Gentile mother at a distance, the nations will be judged on their capacity to discern in her, and in others like her, the presence of Christ himself.

Furthermore, the Canaanite woman's obvious humility unites her to Jesus, placing her among those declared 'blessed' in the beatitudes (5.3-10). Her response to his silence and his speech displays, above all, an exemplary poverty of spirit and humility; she hungers and thirst for the blessings of salvation for her daughter; she seeks to be granted mercy; and she is single-hearted in her devotion. As such, though outside Israel, she will indeed receive the rewards of the blessed which constitute, in effect, the Kingdom of Heaven. Most markedly, however, she shares those qualities with Jesus himself. Her humility has nothing to do with her gender or even alien status; it is profoundly christological, since Jesus himself is the one who is truly *praüis*, humble of heart (11.29) and who summons disciples to learn from his teaching and example.

For all its inclusive vision, however, Matthew preserves a degree of distinction between insider and outsider.<sup>37</sup> There is nothing facile about the inclusion of the Gentiles: there are still parts of the Gospel that speak of tax collectors, Gentiles and unrepentant sinners in the

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Irenaeus develops this notion in his understanding of the incarnation as 'recapitulation' (*Against Heresies* V.21, in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 1 [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1967]).

37. Jackson concludes that Gentiles are already included among the people of God in the Old Testament, so that Matthew is drawing on an authentic biblical tradition by welcoming them (*'Have Mercy on Me'*, pp. 142-44).

same breath (e.g. 6.7; 18.17). Matthew does not erase the line between insiders and outsiders, though he does significantly realign it in the Canaanite story. The election of Israel remains fundamental to his theological vision. The redrawing of moral and spiritual boundaries expands the community but without weakening Israel's priority nor eliminating the possibility of exclusion.<sup>38</sup> Thus, while the healing of Gentiles may be regarded as exceptional in the ministry of Jesus, it plays more fundamentally an eschatological role;<sup>39</sup> Jesus' limited ministry is a 'temporary restriction' on a mission that is already reaching out to the whole world.<sup>40</sup> Significantly, explicit references to a universal mission in Matthew occur only after the narrative of the Canaanite woman (24.14; 26.13; 28.16-20).<sup>41</sup>

Equally, the Matthean text attests to the place of women in the eschatological community. The gender issue need not be sidelined here. The other Gentile healings are afforded to men; this is the only Matthean miracle involving Gentile females. The Canaanite woman plays a prophetic role in the eschatological shape of the Kingdom of Heaven to which the Church bears witness. In her, and those like her, Jesus has 'already envisaged a multiracial people of God',<sup>42</sup> an inclusive communion of persons that welcomes the ministry of women. In this sense, the woman is a foremother in faith for Gentile women in the Church's ministry and mission.<sup>43</sup> Whereas Jesus' initial self-revelation is as Israel's Saviour, his mission and identity are widened in a move envisaged from the beginning of the Gospel, not only with the Magi, but also the inclusion of Canaanite women in the

38. As B. Byrne points out, many Christians today have less trouble with an inclusive attitude to outsiders than with the theological priority of Israel in God's election (*Lifting the Burden: Reading Matthew's Gospel in the Church Today* [Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2004], p. 124).

39. It is, says Luz, 'an exception' that nonetheless has 'a future' (Luz, *Matthew* 8-20, p. 339). See also Hagner, *Matthew 14-28*, p. 443, who speaks of the story as being both exception and anticipation. Cf. D.B. Mel, who sees this narrative as an exception in Jesus' ministry rather than a turning-point ('Jesus and the Canaanite Woman: An Exception for an Exceptional Faith', *Priscilla Papers* 23 [2009], pp. 8-12).

40. France, *Matthew*, p. 590.

41. É. Cuvillier, 'Particularisme et universalisme chez Matthieu', *Biblica* 78 (1997), pp. 497-99.

42. France, *Matthew*, p. 590.

43. There is a significant parallel with the story of the haemorrhaging woman, another unclean female in Matthew's Gospel (9.20-22). Though Jewish, the woman feels compelled to 'steal' her healing rather than asking outright, as the Gentile woman does; yet both experience healing and the faith of both is commended.

Messiah's ancestry (Ruth, Rahab and possibly Tamar, 1.3, 5).<sup>44</sup> In the same way, the two parallel scenes in which the Risen Christ shows himself to his disciples at the end of the Gospel involve revelation, faith and commissioning: to the two women disciples at the empty tomb in Jerusalem (28.1-10) and to the apostles on the mountain in Galilee (28.16-20). In Matthew's worldview, the crucified and risen Christ is not only Saviour and Emmanuel for the Jewish people but also, ultimately, for the Gentiles; and women as well as men are called to participate in that cosmic communion.<sup>45</sup>

There is a further, paradoxical dimension to the Christology of the narrative. Jesus' initially negative response to the woman – his silence and discouragement – reflects a common motif in Jewish and Christian spirituality of the muteness and deafness of God. It is present in psalms of lament (e.g. Ps. 10.1; 22.1-2; 28.1; 44.23-24; 88.14) and in the writings of the mystics. The Matthean Jesus also shares this ordeal: in the wilderness where angels minister to him, but only after a long period of hunger and temptation (4.11), and on the cross where he dies with a sense of forsakenness, mocked by those who believe God has abandoned him (27.39-43). In these experiences, Jesus is led into struggle and darkness without a direct word from God. His response in the wilderness is to persist in trust and covenant loyalty to God; his response on the cross is a cry of lament, addressed prayerfully to God (Ps. 22.1). What the Canaanite woman suffers in her experience of silence and abandonment is also endured by Jesus, and they are profoundly linked. His experience of silence and rejection makes possible her belated access, and that of her daughter, to the life-giving table of God.

Matthew's theology allows for divine silence and the experience of rebuff. It recognizes that such experiences are intrinsic to the spiritual life. Yet, in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus encourages disciples in prayer with the assurance that they will finally be heard, they will receive, entrance will be given them (7.8), even if at first it seems there is no hearing, no receiving, no sound of opening doors. The spiritual life, as Matthew implies, involves seeking and struggle. Indeed, this 'worshipful struggle' with God ... is 'pronounced to be of great faith'.<sup>46</sup> The God who keeps silence, who seems to reject and

44. See Wainwright, *Matthew*, pp. 225–26, and Keener, *Matthew*, p. 415.

45. This theme is anticipated in two key Gentile figures who recognize the truth of Jesus at his trial and crucifixion: Pilate's wife (27.19) and the Roman centurion (27.54); see W. Carter, *Matthew: Storyteller, Interpreter, Evangelist* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2nd edn, 2004), pp. 196–97.

46. Boring, 'Matthew', p. 337.

discourage, is the one who, once roused (to change the metaphor), encourages his disciples to faith even in the midst of the storm, and afterwards calms the rising waves and threatening billows (8.26). In the end, the narrow path is the way to wholeness and communion (7.13-14); the hungry are fed at the family table, both women and men, and all are invited to share its bounty.

### *The Story as Ministry*

How do we recount this story in ministry, with its richness and depth of theological insight, given that ministry is the enacting of our theology in the life and mission of the Church? To do so means not so much extracting an 'application' from the narrative for today's Church, as if the message were distinct from the narrative and symbolic form, but rather entering the story imaginatively and allowing its transforming power to be effective.

There are at least three dimensions arising from the Canaanite story for reinvigorating our ministry as Anglicans. In the first place, the story is a call to communion with the 'other' through connection, engagement and dialogue, echoing the divine welcome. The Church is not a social club that gathers together the like-minded, and ethnically and culturally matched. The Five Marks of Mission address a cosmic vision of conversion and justice in the Church's ministry: a ministry grounded in the prevenient love and mission of God.<sup>47</sup> Authentic communion means that nothing and no-one in creation is marginalized, even those we find difficult and distasteful. As the people of God we are to afford hospitable welcome, mirroring the benevolent God who has welcomed us in Christ. There is a strongly inclusive impetus within Anglicanism that reflects the gospel imperative present in the Canaanite narrative. This imperative incorporates also the ministry and prophetic voice of women, a voice still silenced in many parts of the Anglican Communion. Its inspiration arises from the communion of word and sacrament: proclaiming the Word who is Jesus Christ in our preaching and sacramental rites.

The challenge is, in part, to identify who the 'other' might be for our ministry: that alien and difficult, perhaps unnamed, 'other'.<sup>48</sup>

47. 'The Five Marks of Mission', *Anglican Communion*, available at: <http://www.anglicancommunion.org/ministry/mission/fivemarks.cfm> (accessed 1 September 2014).

48. E.M. Wainwright uses the name 'Justa' for the Canaanite woman, a name given to her in the *Pseudo-Clementine Epistles* ('Not Without my Daughter: Gender and Demon Possession in Matthew 15.21-28', in Levine, *Matthew*, pp. 126-29).

What does it mean to accord welcome in our church, our worship, our mission? The 'other' may be the woman denied leadership in the Church on the basis of her gender. It may be the adult sexually or physically abused as a child – demonized – whose life is now crushed by pain and anger. It may be the clergyperson who has mishandled the situation and lives with a sense of shame and self-accusation. It may be the abuser or the asylum seeker or the person suffering dementia. It may be the atheist or secular humanist. Reaching out in reconciliation is intrinsic to the evangelical task of mission. It may be a difficult and painful path on which to tread, involving potentially rejection and dismissal, and it may take time and patience, but it is nonetheless the gospel way.

There is a further dimension to this theme that affects us more directly as Anglicans. It is possible that the difficult adversary whom we dislike and fear is another Anglican, or a division within Anglicanism, with whom or which we have considerable disagreement. Anglicanism worldwide is deeply fragmented,<sup>49</sup> and more understanding is often shared with Christians of other denominations than with fellow Anglicans. If we are to be in communion with one another, sharing ministry together, we need to move to a model of 'interdependent diversity',<sup>50</sup> that is eucharistic at its heart, embodied in the breaking of the bread. This 'communion in diversity' is grounded in relationship and in the hospitality around the Lord's Table: in the sharing of bread and wine.<sup>51</sup> We pursue such communion, however, not on the basis of superiority and patronage, but in the awareness of our own belated status as Gentiles, our history of enmity against God and one another, and our tendency to divide and privilege.

At the same time, the notion of communion with the 'other' as central to ministry is not without boundaries or restraints. It does not imply, for example, that we accept damaging and abusive behaviour in the Church, especially from those we set apart for ministry – despite the mistakes of the Church's past in naive and sometimes culpable defensiveness. We cannot give access to wolves who will devour the

49. For further on the fragmentation of contemporary Anglicanism, see D. Reid, 'Anglican Diversity and Conflict: A Study on God, Gender and Authority', in B. Kaye (ed.), *Wonderful and Confessedly Strange: Australian Essays in Anglican Ecclesiology* (Adelaide: ATF Press, 2006), pp. 245–65.

50. B. Kaye, *Reinventing Anglicanism. A Vision of Confidence, Community and Engagement in Anglican Christianity* (Adelaide: OpenBook, 2003), pp. 175–90.

51. P. Avis, *The Anglican Understanding of the Church: An Introduction* (London: SPCK, 2nd edn, 2013), pp. 95–96.



flock, and especially the vulnerable lambs, nor allow the sheep to wander at will, helpless and endangered (Mt. 18.10-14). In making a place at the table for those whom God has welcomed and forgiven, we invite them into a communion of righteousness in Christ, with all that that implies about right thinking, speaking and living.

In the second place, the narrative of the Canaanite woman encourages us, while recognizing the place of the other, not to lose our own identity as the household of God and disciples of Jesus Christ. Again, this point touches on our identity as Anglicans, and the charism we bring to ministry. A model of 'interdependent diversity' commits us to relationship with one another, while also making room, within gospel limits, for pluralistic expressions of faith and ministry. Both the unity and the diversity come down to us through our complex traditions, and both are gifts, however difficult to sustain. Naming the non-negotiable core of faith is a vital part of this task, as is identifying the elements of belief and action that are of secondary import. The Canaanite woman knows that entry into the Kingdom of Heaven entails a conversion for her, a new way of being. She recognizes the priority of Israel and uses its language. She enters into a tradition that may not be originally her own but that gives space and dignity to her own identity as a Gentile woman. Yet there is a givenness to the place she enters, a shape and form already fashioned. In the same way, our rich biblical and theological traditions, and our Anglican heritage, cannot be lost in the interchange of mission. That givenness includes the ministry of women, who have biblical authority to proclaim the good news in the Church's life and ministry.<sup>52</sup> The borders of the Church may properly be blurred but the centre needs to hold firm – not as a series of imposed propositions but as guidelines that make possible our relationship with one another (with Anglicans past and present) and enhance our eucharistic communion.<sup>53</sup>

Thirdly, the story of the Canaanite woman reminds us of the importance of the theological language we use in ministry. The understanding we share as Anglicans is expressed, not in our own unique creed or catechism nor even primarily in doctrinal statements,

52. Wainwright argues that this story functioned in the Matthean community to highlight the legitimacy of 'women's active role in liturgy' (*Matthew*, p. 245).

53. The Chicago Lambeth Quadrilateral of 1866 is a helpful way of defining the centre (the Scriptures, the Nicene Creed, the dominical sacraments, and the episcopate) but is limited if it is not set within the context of mutual exchange and dialogue. Available at: [http://www.anglicancommunion.org/resources/acis/docs/chicago\\_lambeth\\_quadrilateral.cfm](http://www.anglicancommunion.org/resources/acis/docs/chicago_lambeth_quadrilateral.cfm) (accessed 3 September 2014).

but more foundationally in liturgy: in the words we use for prayer, preaching and celebrating the sacraments. These words, originating in Scripture and carried through the tradition of the Church, articulate our ministry. The woman's speech in addressing Jesus is not only the language of the insiders, but it is also implicitly the Church's language, the language of liturgy, the language of salvation. The woman confesses her faith in Jesus, with awareness of his identity and mission. She expresses the need for mercy in biblical words that carry ritual and salvific meaning, words shaped by Israel's past, by the Church's present, by the future Kingdom of Heaven. There is a simplicity to this language, a succinctness, a lack of ostentation and verbiage. Far from 'heaping up empty phrases' and uttering 'many words' (6.7 - as the Gentiles do!), this Gentile woman's prayer is eloquent yet concise, encapsulating her need in the language of the Bible and the Church in its dependence on and worship of God. For the readers of the Gospel, the story teaches us how to approach God: 'This woman ... not only becomes for us Gentiles the forerunner of our faith, but her reply to Jesus teaches us how to speak'.<sup>54</sup> Our ministry as Anglicans needs to recognize the power of a language that is formed by the Bible and the Book of Common Prayer (1662): its capacity to narrate our story, and to shape it into the form of Christ's saving presence in the world.

As Anglicans, we have the capacity to offer a spirituality in our ministry that has the wisdom to hold people in the depths of their experience, in desolation and darkness, and at those times where God seems most afflicted with deafness. Here in this ambiguous place, in the place of waiting and silence - which embraces both desolation and consolation - we stand with the Canaanite woman, as also with Christ. We have a rich tradition of prayer that lends itself to patience and silence, where we become more deeply attuned to God. This tradition is grounded in theology and faith, and its spirituality is one of affinity and connection. In the silence, the silence of our own abandonment, the silence of God's being, we hear and proclaim in our ministry the reverberating Word, drawing us into that profound union of Persons - Father, Son and Holy Spirit - which lies at the heart of creation.

### *Conclusion*

In the end, the Matthean story of the Canaanite woman and her daughter is a transforming one, concerned profoundly with relationship

54. Hauerwas, *Matthew*, p. 144.

and change. We enter it from our own context, with the awareness of our own marginalization: through sin, through social forces, through prejudice. It names the pain of our struggle and sense of alienation. Yet the story is also a confirming one, giving us a language to speak and access to salvation. The theology of the story portrays a God who sometimes appears silent, but in the end responds with mercy to those in need. It presents a vision of the grace of God, revealed in Jesus, opening doors on the outsider, the woman, the enemy, so that those who seek find. It outlines the shape of the Church's ministry, living eschatologically by the vision and values of the Kingdom of Heaven. In this communion, all are embraced, all belong, all are healed and fed at the eucharistic table; women as well as men have the voice to minister, serve, speak the faith and receive mercy. It is not an indiscriminate welcome: those invited into the divine communion are called to live a life of radical righteousness, following the path forged by Christ himself. The Canaanite woman's transformation from outsider to insider, from unclean to clean, from enemy to friend embodies the transformation offered by God from enmity to communion. Her worship of Christ as the source of salvation, and her faith in him – with its struggle, tenacity and depth – outline the shape and form of the Church's life.