

Nevertheless she persisted

Pentecost 11

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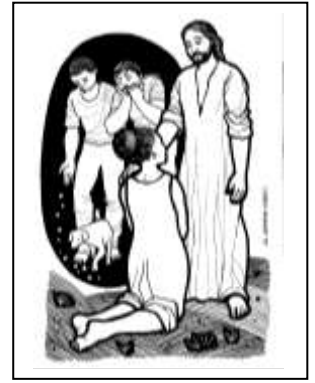
Revd Jenny Wilkens

Genesis 45:1-15; Psalm 138

Romans 11:1-2, 29-32

Matthew 15: 21-28

http://www.stlukesinthecity.org.nz/sermons_pid_22.html



I wonder if you have heard of the recent campaign called “Nevertheless she persisted”. It became popular in February this year after Senator Elizabeth Warren was objecting to the confirmation of Senator Jeff Sessions as US Attorney General because of his record on civil rights. The US Senate voted to silence her. In an effort to defend the Senate's actions and to blame Senator Warren, Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell said this: “She was warned. She was given an explanation. **Nevertheless, she persisted.**”

The expression went viral as feminists posted it with hashtag references to other women who have persisted in breaking barriers, despite being silenced or ignored - Emmeline Pankhurst, Marie Curie, Rosa Parks, Malala Yousafzai, we might add our own Kiwi women, Kate Shepherd, Helen Clark...

Nevertheless she persisted. After hearing today’s Gospel, surely we can add this unnamed woman to the list of heroic women who nevertheless persisted. She had everything against her in her encounter with Jesus. Matthew sets the scene, making it clear that Jesus has travelled out of his home region of Galilee into the district of Tyre and Sidon on the Mediterranean coast, Gentile territory. Mark’s version of this story simply says the woman was Syro-Phoenician, a geographical description. But Matthew stacks the cards against this woman even more by calling her a *Canaanite* woman, referencing the ancient enemies of the people of Israel, those with whom they’d contested the right to live in the land. It would be like saying today a Palestinian woman or a woman from Gaza came and started shouting at Jesus – she would soon be arrested today. Yes, this woman creates a scene, and yet she has heard enough of Jesus to use the right language, ‘Have mercy on me, Lord’ could be straight from the Psalms, or as we have just sung, *Kyrie eleison*, Lord have mercy. She calls him Son of David, she recognises Jesus’ Jewish heritage, does she know this is a Messianic title? But her overriding concern, what wrings the emotion from her is her daughter – my daughter is tormented.

‘But he did not answer her at all’. How sad is that? And we start to feel a bit uncomfortable, this is not the Jesus we know and love, who responds to all with compassion and concern. Is he just reverting to type, as a good Jewish rabbi in public, not acknowledging a woman who should know to keep her place in the private sphere, not make a spectacle of herself in the public arena? New Testament scholar Kenneth Bailey¹ thinks Jesus is playing this role deliberately, all the more to shock his disciples later, but I’m not so sure.

The disciples certainly make the ‘right’ response: get rid of her, get rid of the problem, she keeps shouting after us, she’s bringing us into disrepute. Their focus is on themselves, not really seeing the woman in front of them at all.

Jesus’ reply too seems almost as if he’s repeating a formula: ‘I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel’ – and indeed it is the formula he has addressed to the 12 when he sent them out on mission: “Do not go among the Gentiles or enter any town of the Samaritans. Go rather to the lost sheep of Israel.”(Matthew 10:5,6)

As Matthew paints a picture of Jesus wrestling with himself, rehearsing his sense of mission to his own people but confronted by the needs of a larger world focussed in this woman right in front of him, is he reflecting the struggles of his own community over the place of Jews and Gentiles in the church, of just who are the people of God?

Nevertheless she persisted. She knelt before Jesus, incidentally blocking his way, but the word is used of one kneeling down in worship. For the sake of her child, she will prostrate herself, she will beg, Lord, help me.

We can’t believe the response she gets from Jesus who speaks so harshly to this mother desperate with concern for her child. “It is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs” (Mt 15:26).

Scholars have fallen all over themselves trying to soften the blow of this, to rehabilitate Jesus’ image! Is this a well-known Jewish proverb or maxim that Jesus is quoting? Are they engaged in a sort of whimsical repartee, is there a twinkle in the eye, as sparring partners engage? Do we realise that the word Jesus is using for dog is not the unclean street dogs, but the word for puppy dog or pet dog – doesn’t that make it better? I’m not sure it does...

Or is the reality that Jesus is indeed deeply challenged by this Canaanite woman, who breaks through every barrier that should have kept her away from him as a woman, a foreigner, a Gentile, and then courageously persists despite all attempts to ignore her or push her away?

¹ Bailey, Kenneth. Jesus through Middle Eastern eyes. London: SPCK, 2008.

Is Jesus' understanding of his own calling, his own mission to the lost sheep of Israel being blown open, his vision expanded by this woman's appeal to whatever she has heard of him that draws her to him in the desperate search for healing for her daughter?

It seems so, for Jesus responds. What to? Her courage, her persistence, her wit – 'even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table'. Give me crumbs – her willingness to receive in all humility whatever is offered. Her faith – "Woman, great is your faith". Jesus responds to the faith that has drawn her to him, that has kept her persisting in asking that he act on her behalf for the good of her daughter. She has seen and heard enough of him that somehow she knows his life and ministry describes a God of love whose purpose is healing and life and wholeness for all, a God who breaks barriers to respond, a God who receives all at the table whether they are at it or under it.

In the writings of the early church², this persistent woman gains a name, Justa, the just or righteous one, but the name Justa speaks to me of one who also demands justice on behalf of the powerless, the vulnerable. Her daughter also receives a name, Bernice. It's said that they became disciples of Jesus but were cast out of their home by Justa's husband. Justa was a woman of means, but gave her daughter in marriage to a Christian man who happened to be poor. She adopted two sons who fell in with the heretic Simon Magus but were brought back to the truth by Zacchaeus. So there she has her place as one of Christian history's persistent women of faith.

As we live our own story of faith in our day, of course, the challenge comes to us too. If this is the God we believe in, if this is the Christ we have come to know and love, if we see here Jesus learning and broadening his vision of who God loves and accepts, just what does that mean for the way we relate to those we will meet this week, for the next person we meet who breaks our comfort barrier if you like, for the next refugee picture we see on our TV screen or internet, for the next discussion we have about the international situation or our national elections or our local Christchurch issues? In a world that is so quick to take sides, to polarise, to demonise, who will be the Canaanite woman who challenges me to go beyond my comfort zone and recognise our common humanity as loved children of God?

And does Justa, the mother of Bernice, also encourage us to persist, to keep coming to Jesus with those in need whom we hold in our hearts and in our prayers? May we bring them with us as we are privileged to be fed at Christ's table today, not just crumbs, but the Bread of Life. Amen.

² Pseudo-Clementine Homilies 2:19-21, quoted in Smith, Dennis & Michael Williams (eds). *The Storyteller's Companion to the Bible*, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1999, 77.