

No one likes to be overlooked. Imagine being overlooked all the time because of what you look like. You are passed over for a job interview because of the colour of your skin, you don't get the promotion you deserve because you are a woman, no one will give you a chance because you are too old or too young. Or perhaps you don't have to imagine it – perhaps you know what it feels like. If you have ever been written off or overlooked when someone doesn't even know you or the content of your character, you can understand the plight of the Canaanite woman in today's reading from Matthew. Being overlooked is probably a way of life for her. Even in the Gospel lesson she does not get a name.

Just by approaching Jesus, this woman has broken several social taboos. She is a Gentile approaching a Jew. Do you remember what it was like when Presbyterians had little or nothing to do with Roman Catholics? Maybe, if you grew up Presbyterian, you remember the first time you went to a Catholic service - the strange smell of incense, the unexpected standing and sitting, the awkwardness of having to kneel, seeing statues of Mary and a crucifix rather than an empty cross, all making you feel like you didn't belong. The boundaries between Jew and Gentile in Jesus' day were at least as pronounced, rather like the boundaries between Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland.

This Canaanite was also a woman approaching a group of men. We have overcome many of the male-female boundaries of Jesus' day. But we do know something of how rigid male and female boundaries are in much of the Middle East today. When we hear stories of women in the Gulf states who are not allowed to go out in public without husband or father or brother, we get some idea of what the Canaanite woman may have been risking to talk to Jesus in public.

Race, nation, history and socio-economics also intrude. Canaanites were ancient enemies, the people who had been cursed after the flood, destined to be subjugated as slaves, the people who had been dispossessed by Israel's invasion and occupation of their land. Jews were wary of the residents of the Phoenician cities of Tyre and Sidon. The inhabitants are described by the Jewish historian Josephus as "notoriously our bitterest enemies." At that time the poor rural Jewish peasants of Galilee grew food for the rich Gentile cities like Tyre and Sidon. We do not know the social class of this Canaanite woman, but she would have been seen as coming from the culture of Jewish oppressors. Imagine a white Protestant American woman going to beg for help from an Imam at a Mosque.

Everything seems to be working against this woman - gender, race, religion, class and nationalism – as she came to seek help for her daughter. It must have been quite a spectacle to have her throw herself at the feet of Jesus. We can hear the embarrassment of the disciples : “Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us.”

Jesus is confronted by a woman, a foreigner, who calls out to him, demanding his help. It's not at all surprising that Jesus doesn't answer her. In an honour/shame culture, such as Jesus lived in, answering someone who confronted you like that would be seen by all onlookers - and by anyone who heard the gossip from the onlookers, which would spread like wildfire especially if anything unconventional happened - as an admission from the person who responded that the challenger was at least an equal. Once Jesus responds to the woman, that's what everyone watching will think - that Jesus is no better than she is.

So at first Jesus doesn't respond – he makes no answer at all to someone who came to him in need. But the disciples come in their embarrassment, urging him to send her away. Jesus' next response sounds almost like a 'thinking aloud' to himself – “but I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel”. That's what he had told his disciples when he sent them out in mission. That's where he had focused his mission, apart from healing the daughter of one Roman centurion (and he had praised his faith). He had gone away into foreign territory, Gentile territory, and now here was this woman shouting for his help, addressing him as Lord (which only the disciples had done so far), speaking words that belonged in

the liturgy of worship – “Lord, Son of David, have mercy on me” - and kneeling before him in a posture of worship. She was claiming the mercy, the grace, the healing of God through Jesus for her daughter. Was his mission meant to expand to include this woman?

Jesus' response is not very encouraging – in fact it was just as insulting then as it sounds to us now - “It is not fair to give the children’s bread to the dogs.” Jews considered dogs to be scavengers and unclean animals. Every reference to dogs in the Bible is negative.

But this woman seems unfazed by everything working against her. She won't take no for an answer – instead, she quips back at Jesus, “Yes, but even the dogs under the table deserve the crumbs.”

This is a woman who understood the power of God’s grace, a woman who believed so much that she knew a crumb from Jesus would suffice.

This is the only place in the Gospels where someone won a theological argument with Jesus. He tied the wisest biblical scholars in knots, but not this woman.

The Canaanite woman models the most admirable human behaviour, not Jesus. She shows a willingness to be vulnerable by seeking help from a longstanding enemy whom she knows despises her because of national and racial divisions. She asks for help for her daughter, not for herself. She is persistent in the face of insults and rejection, for her daughter's sake. She has the best lines in the story, especially her last one. "Call me dog, but even the dogs get the crumbs that fall from the table." She is the clear underdog (pun intended) who wins the prize of highest value for any mother, Jew or despised Canaanite – her child's health and well-being.

And what about Jesus? Jesus' silence, Jesus' initial rejection of her request, Jesus' insulting reply is pretty uncomfortable stuff to hear. We don't mind so much when he has pretty harsh things to say about the Pharisees – though of course that would have been deeply disturbing for those who first heard him. What Jesus says here was just what they would have expected him to say – what any sensible Jew would say. But for us – why would Jesus treat this woman so harshly? Jesus was learning, Jesus was being challenged, Jesus was coming to a new broader understanding of what his mission was. This Canaanite woman’s persistence not only made her daughter whole; it also showed Jesus the larger world he had come to listen to and heal.

Just as others, particularly women, ministered to Jesus by providing food or hospitality, so this Canaanite ministers by helping him to move across ethnic boundaries, to realise in a new way that God's mercy and generosity will be for those beyond the lost sheep of Israel as well. At the beginning of Matthew's gospel, the Gentile world had come to pay homage to the new-born king, in the arrival of the magi.

At the end of Matthew's gospel, Jesus will commission his followers “Go into all the world, make disciples of all nations.”

Here, Jesus begins to learn how to share the blessing of God, the healing and grace of God, with the whole world.

And we are called to follow Jesus. Where might this lead us, as we look around us at the people who bear the brunt of our society's indifference and rejection and insult today? Are there people who we cannot really believe God would bless and heal and restore? Are there ancient prejudices or recent hurts and fears that block our ability to share the love of God with some people? Can we learn to see people differently, to respond to people differently, because we can learn to see them as children of God, who deserve, not just the crumbs that fall to the floor, but a seat with us at God's table?