

# Kyrie Eleison

Isaiah 56:1, 6-8 | Psalm 67 | Romans 11:2a, 29-32 | Matthew 15:21-28

## MATTHEW 15:21-28

<sup>21</sup> Jesus left that place and went away to the district of Tyre and Sidon. <sup>22</sup> Just then a Canaanite woman from that region came out and started shouting, 'Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon.' <sup>23</sup> But he did not answer her at all. And his disciples came and urged him, saying, 'Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us.' <sup>24</sup> He answered, 'I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.' <sup>25</sup> But she came and knelt before him, saying, 'Lord, help me.' <sup>26</sup> He answered, 'It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs.' <sup>27</sup> She said, 'Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table.' <sup>28</sup> Then Jesus answered her, 'Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.' And her daughter was healed instantly.

## INTRODUCTION

During the early centuries of the common era, *Saracen* was a term used to describe people from *Arabia Petraea*, the Roman Empire's Arabian province.<sup>1</sup> This area encompassed the southern Levant, including the north western Arabian Peninsula, Jordan, and Israel. This is the very same land that, much earlier, when God's people were still captive in Egypt, was simply known as Canaan. The term *Saracen* evolved over time, becoming the general term for Arab Muslims in the middle ages. West of this territory were the Berbers, Muslims from North and West Africa who later made their way north into what is now Spain. In Europe, this group was known as the *Moors*, from the Greek *μαύρος*, meaning dark, likely a reference to their skin colour. *Saracens* and *Moors*—two terms that combined and conflated religious, ethnic, and racial designations, and by the Renaissance, came to mean anything that wasn't European Christian. A passage from *Cursor Mundi*, a 13th century history, graphically demonstrates as much:

The king met with four Saracens, who were black... Never before that hour did anyone see so horribly shaped a creature. Their black hue was marvelous... Their mouths were so broad, their eyes so large, that it made their faces repulsive... [The king] held [the rods or trees] out to them to kiss; and they kneeled and kissed them. Immediately their skin became white as milk, and they took on the hue of high blood, and all their appearance was made new.<sup>2</sup>

The story suggests that the black Muslim will be transformed into a white human if he converted to Christianity. Indeed, this kind of depiction is rampant throughout medieval European literature and art. Because, from the Levant to Europe, like the rest of the world, there is a long history of cultural and ethnic prejudice. From the Canaanites to the Saracens to the Moors—this is human history. And our Gospel reading this morning addresses these same ideas. In this passage, Jesus confronts an all-too-common attitude about race (understanding that race is more than just skin colour, but several shared physical and social qualities),

<sup>1</sup> This may be a hard sermon for some people. I believe it is essential for the modern church to wrestle with what Jesus is saying and doing in this Gospel reading. But discussing it openly and directly may mean raising ideas and talking about cultural phenomena that are emotionally difficult for some people.

<sup>2</sup> This quotation is adapted from the word as cited in Sophia Rose Arjana, *Muslims in the Western Imagination* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 29.

through his discussion with a Canaanite woman.<sup>3</sup> And this is Matthew's point: Faith is not restricted to a particular race, and so neither should be mercy. Let's take a look.

### A RACIST COMMENT?

The Canaanite woman has approached Jesus, begging for mercy for her daughter. Jesus, somewhat uncharacteristically, remained quiet. The woman kept shouting to the point of annoying the disciples, who asked Jesus to just dismiss her. It's at this point, after the disciples had intervened, that Jesus determined to speak with the woman. But what comes out of Jesus's mouth is nothing short of shocking. "*It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs.*"<sup>4</sup> That's right, Jesus seems to be calling this Canaanite woman a dog. And yes, it was just as extreme and vulgar of an insult then as it is today in the Middle East—basically the opposite of Vienna where dogs are the most treasured of all beings. But why? Why does Jesus call her this? What is his point? Is he just being racist? These are important questions.<sup>5</sup>

You see, Canaanites and Jews have a long, terrible history. Canaanites were the inhabitants of the Promised Land before Israel arrived after the Exodus. And when Israel arrived, they conquered.<sup>6</sup> The Canaanites, of course, fought back. And these peoples pretty much hated each other for the 2,000 years that followed. We don't have time to get into the precise nature of the conquest—but it is important to note that this was *not* God commanding Israel to wipe out an innocent people. Canaanites, most likely a mix of Egyptian and Hittite peoples, were polytheistic and simply evil in some of their religious practices, which included sacrificing children to the Canaanite gods. The Israelite conquest of Canaan was not about destroying a people as much as it was about destroying a horrific, anti-Yahweh, idolatrous way of life.<sup>7</sup> And what's more, they had heard of the God of Israel, and rejected, him before Israel ever arrived.<sup>8</sup> And so, you see, there is a racial, ethnic, and cultural malice between Jews and Canaanites that had been passed down from generation to generation. That this Canaanite woman would approach Jesus, a Jew, and ask him for mercy is astonishing. That Jesus would call a Canaanite a dog is mundanely unsurprising. But is that it? Is Jesus just insulting her?

I would suggest there is something else going on here. The immediate setting as well as the wider literary context in Matthew suggest another way of understanding what has happened.

First, the immediate setting. Jesus left Gennesaret and walked 35 miles to Tyre, then another 25 to Sidon.<sup>9</sup> That's a long way to walk. And it was straight into gentile-pagan territory. It almost seems as if it is on purpose. What's more, notice what Jesus said to his disciples before he spoke to the woman. Remember, they complained about her. But Jesus leans into them first

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<sup>3</sup> For an interesting and very recent discussion of the many social and physical features of race, see Isabel Wilkerson, *Caste: The Origins of our Discontents* (New York: Random House, 2020).

<sup>4</sup> Matt 15:26.

<sup>5</sup> Is Jesus being sexist? I don't think so. Jesus already traversed male-female social protocols by talking in friendly terms with women on previous occasions and including women among his disciples. It would be odd for him to suddenly have problems with women.

<sup>6</sup> For the details of the conquest, see the whole book of Joshua.

<sup>7</sup> For the important historical background, see especially John Walton, *The Lost World of the Israelite Conquest* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2017) and Joshua R. Butler, *The Skeletons in God's Closet* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2014).

<sup>8</sup> Rahab admits as much to the Israelite spies in Josh 2:8-11.

<sup>9</sup> See Matt 14:34.

and says: *"I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel."*<sup>10</sup> He is indicating that his Messianic calling is first to bring a message of salvation to the Jews.<sup>11</sup> But even this, I think, he frames provocatively. He says it in a way that reinforces a prejudice that undoubtedly persisted among his Jewish followers, if not the disciples. That 'he came only for the lost sheep of Israel' reinforces a sense of superiority and that these Canaanites don't have a place in the salvation of Jesus Christ. But of course, like a good Socratic teacher, having reinforced a proposition, he turns the table and demolishes it. He listens to the woman push back—*"Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table."*<sup>12</sup> Notice she calls him Lord. In fact, she does it three times. Not even the disciples call Jesus Lord here. He listens to her push back and responds. *"Great is your faith."* This is in marked contrast to what we heard about the faith of Peter last week: *"You of little faith."*<sup>13</sup> If Jesus's comment was out of prejudice, it didn't hold up very well. He commended her faith and healed her daughter with his very next sentence. It seems Jesus was really teaching his disciples something about their annoyance with this woman and about their prejudice.

Second, notice that Matthew calls her a Canaanite—where his Markan source refers to her as a Syrophenician woman.<sup>14</sup> This suggests race is the key issue for Matthew. And the wider context of Matthew reveals this to be one of his major themes. Matthew's genealogy includes gentiles—including a Canaanite.<sup>15</sup> He is the only one to tell the story of the magi from the east. A Roman centurion is commended for his faith and his servant healed back in chapter 9.<sup>16</sup> Another Roman centurion will make a confession of faith at the foot of the cross in chapter 27.<sup>17</sup> And let's not forget the Great Commission—'go and make disciples of *all nations*.'<sup>18</sup> You see, Matthew's Gospel has a particular agenda—helping Christians understand that Jesus, himself, affirmed the blessing of all nations and the inclusion of gentiles in the Christian faith. These disciples and the Jewish audience of that day needed to let go of the assumption that their racial heritage is what made them favoured by God. It's not. From Abraham to Paul to the present day, what God wants is not a particular complexion or even a particular set of religious rites, but faith—faith like Jesus found in that Canaanite woman.<sup>19</sup>

### A RACIST CULTURE?

And so? What now? What are we to make of Jesus's provocative statement pointing us to racial prejudice and then his commendation of the Canaanite woman's faith? How does this apply to us? I hardly need to say anything.

You know we live in a messed up a world, a world full of prejudice, hatred, and racism. These last few months have been jarring—as mobile phone video after mobile phone video surfaced, showing a hate crime of one sort or another in the US. It's disturbing. And not just because it

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<sup>10</sup> Matt 15:24.

<sup>11</sup> This statement echoes something Jesus had already said. See Matt 10:6.

<sup>12</sup> Matt 15:27.

<sup>13</sup> Matt 14:31.

<sup>14</sup> Mark 7:24-30.

<sup>15</sup> Matt 1:3, 5, and 6. At least Rahab, Ruth, Uriah, and his wife (Bathsheba) are gentiles. See Josh 6:25 for the sparing of Rahab, the Canaanite, that allows here to enter the genealogy.

<sup>16</sup> Matt 8:5-13.

<sup>17</sup> Matt 27:54.

<sup>18</sup> Matt 28:18-20. Importantly, the Abrahamic covenant promised blessing for all nations. See Gen 12:1-3.

<sup>19</sup> See Rom 4:1-12.

happens to black Americans more than others—there are a variety of statistics on that which can be used to paint any number of political pictures. It’s disturbing because it happens at all. But, what can we do? Well, I’d like to suggest we learn what those disciples were meant to learn that day.

So, let’s pay some attention. Let’s check our own hearts. Let’s consider what we should do here at Christ Church. And I don’t just mean: ‘Do I hate people because of the colour of their skin?’ I mean: ‘Am I dismissive of people because I don’t connect with their culture and maybe don’t communicate clearly with them? Do I make unfair assumptions about people based on their ethnic heritage? Do I view certain people, even in this church community, as lesser members or lesser Anglicans because they practice their faith differently or were formed in a different expression of the faith?’ Let’s take it a step further. ‘Have I stopped to consider how someone from a different ethnic heritage might experience what I am saying? Experience a church service? Experience living in central Europe?’ For many of us, it will mean something like checking our white privilege. For some, like me, it may mean critically examining our cultures. What is it like for a Nigerian to ride the *strassenbahn*? What is like for a person with dark skin to read the dessert menu at virtually every traditional Austrian restaurant and see *Mohr im Hemd* (*Moor—meaning dark-skinned person—in a shirt*)? And yet for others, it may mean opening up about culture and explaining things, or having new experiences, or participating in new and different ways, some of which may be uncomfortable or inconvenient. For all of us, it may mean forming real friendships that go beyond mere acquaintance. And no, it’s not easy. It never was, not even for the disciples who travelled with Jesus.

## CONCLUSION

As I begin to close, to I want to be careful here that we not lose sight of the gospel. There may be much of which we have to repent. And we see in the text an example—an example of what it looks like to throw ourselves at the mercy of Christ Jesus. You see, this is an important passage for our liturgy. The Canaanite woman’s second line—“*Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table.*”—finds its way into our *Prayer of Humble Access*.<sup>20</sup> Only there, it recognizes we aren’t worthy even of the crumbs. How can we be so bold as to think ourselves superior to anyone else, when the reality of our sin ranks us below the dogs? And so, what can we do? We can but utter her initial plea: “*Lord, have mercy.*” This also finds its way into our liturgy as the *kyrie eleison*.<sup>21</sup>

Lord have mercy.  
Christ have mercy.  
Lord have mercy.

Thanks be to God that in Jesus Christ, all who have faith, regardless of race, find mercy.

Let me pray: *Heavenly Father, having found mercy from you in the death and resurrection of your Son, helps us to show mercy to all others, without prejudice or partiality. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.*

<sup>20</sup> The Archbishop’s Council 2000, *Common Worship* (London: Church House Publishing, 2000), 170, 232.

<sup>21</sup> The Archbishop’s Council 2000, *Common Worship* (London: Church House Publishing, 2000), 181, 240.