



ST. STEPHEN'S ANGLICAN CHURCH

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The Second Sunday in Lent, March 4th, 2012

✠ In The Name of The Father and of The Son and of The Holy Ghost. Amen. ✠

Today's Communion Gospel illustrates the striking difference between the way Jesus was treated by his disciples and the way he was perceived by some of the pagans he met – in this instance a Canaanite woman who begged him to heal her daughter.

It isn't the sort of difference between the way a chap is treated by close friends and the way he would be treated by a complete stranger. It isn't a difference one might expect to encounter between Jews and gentiles. It would probably still have existed if both the disciples and the woman had been Jewish – though if she had not been a gentile the difference would have been neither as apparent nor as surprising.

The difference is simply a matter of perception. To the disciples Jesus was a candidate for public office – a candidate with a divine mission, to be sure; but a still candidate in desperate need of their advice. The Canaanite woman, by contrast, clearly recognized Jesus as divine. This is clear from the way she greeted him: "Have mercy on me, O Lord, thou son of David."

This raises an interesting question: How come a gentile woman, from an ethnic group

that had historically been among the bitterest enemies of the Jewish people, was able to recognize something in Jesus that his disciples could not?

Some folks – ignoring howls of "sexism" – might well ascribe it to woman's intuition. And, no matter what the politically correct might have to say, the theory cannot be easily dismissed. The Gospels tend to indicate that women more readily recognized Jesus' divinity than men.

A more likely explanation, however, is that his disciples' understanding of Jesus' role was largely shaped by contemporary Scriptural scholarship. Women, who were far less involved in Scriptural study, were by no means so susceptible to contemporary theological notions.

Male Jews in the First Century AD began intensively studying the Scriptures at a very early age and one of the primary objects of their study was the prophecies concerning the Messiah. And, as you have heard *ad nauseam* from this pulpit, the Jews of Jesus' day were firmly convinced the Messiah was going to be a warrior prince in the manner of the great King David.

It is, thus, unsurprising that Jesus' disciples believed him to be the Messiah on the pattern of the vision shared all reputable Jewish Bible scholars – a divinely appointed but entirely human military leader. And this was the view most of them seem to have clung to all the way up to the Crucifixion.

Not only that, they were engaged in what they believed to be campaign sweep through what folks in the First Century regarded as “flyover country.” They had just completed a tour Galilee and the 10 semi-independent Greek cities known as the Decapolis. It had been added to the patrimony of Herod the Great by the Emperor August about a half century before. It was not part of Judea, although it was part of the original Promised Land.

Religious Jews shared Galilee with both Greek residents of the Decapolis and Jews who had renounced Judaism and adopted the Greek culture. In short, it was a region particularly rich in the folks religious Jews were apt to dismiss as “publicans and sinners.” As such, religious Jews regarded Galilee with deep suspicion.

Shortly before the encounter with the Canaanite woman, Jesus and his entourage had travelled from this semi-heathen hinterland to genuinely pagan territory. The cities of Tyre and Sidon were ethnically Phoenician and Canaanite. Even so, the region was home to a large population of Jews – folks the disciples considered to be Jesus' target audience. This is why they advised Jesus to send the Canaanite woman away. It wasn't that they were unsympathetic. She just wasn't part of the demographic they were appealing to.

They must have shocked when Jesus told them: “I wasn't sent here solely to preach to Jewish people.” They shouldn't have been,

of course. Even the most laggardly Scriptural student knew God declared the Messiah to be a “light to lighten the gentiles.” However, they were even more surprised to hear Jesus use his meeting with the Canaanite woman to give his Jewish audience a gentle lesson in the proper way to behave when one comes face to face with God incarnate.

“It is not right to give the children's food to dogs,” he said, giving the *pro forma* rabbinical excuse for not preaching to pagans. “True,” replied the woman, “But even dogs are allowed to eat the scraps that fall from their masters' tables.” It was an act of the most extraordinary humility and she was treating Jesus with a far greater reverence he had ever received from his Jewish followers, including his disciples.

His reply must have shocked them to the very core. “Woman,” he declared, admiringly, “Great is thy faith! Be it unto thee even as thou wilt.”

It was a statement that was both a rebuke to his Jewish followers and a compliment to the Canaanite woman. And it echoed statement Jesus has made to another Gentile not long before – a Roman Centurion who besought him to heal his slave: “Truly, I say unto you, never have I found such great faith – certainly not in Israel.”

A lesson to be learned from this incident is that Bible study needs to be approached with humility. It is important not to put our own personal gloss on God's words. In other words, we should let God speak from himself, not try to do the job for him.

As one of my old professors used to say: “Read the Scriptures, gentlemen. They shed and amazing light on the commentaries.”
AMEN.