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(English translation: Kathy WEBB-PEPLOE)

Jesus and the Canaanite – What's new?

- ²¹ Jesus left that place and withdrew to the region of Tyre and Sidon.
- ²² And suddenly out came a Canaanite woman from that district and started shouting, 'Lord, Son of David, take pity on me. My daughter is tormented by a devil.'
- ²³ But he said not a word in answer to her. And his disciples went and pleaded with him, saying, 'Give her what she wants, because she keeps shouting after us.'
- ²⁴ He said in reply, 'I was sent only to the lost sheep of the House of Israel.'
- ²⁵ But the woman had come up and was bowing low before him. 'Lord,' she said, 'help me.'
- ²⁶ He replied, 'It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to little dogs.'
- ²⁷ She retorted, 'Ah yes, Lord; but even little dogs eat the scraps that fall from their masters' table.'
- ²⁸ Then Jesus answered her, 'Woman, you have great faith. Let your desire be granted.' And from that moment her daughter was well again.

(Matthew 15; 21-28)

I would like to propose three stages to our reading of this text:

- The first looking at the text itself and what comes before and after it
- The second, trying to live the story as though we had been there, for example as one of the disciples
- The last more free and poetical, if you like.

1 – The text

Jesus is on the move as he often was. He disengages from the crowd following him and crosses the lake of Gennesaret (nowadays Gerash in Jordan) and reaches Tyre and Sidon on the border between Galilee and the country beyond, Canaan, cursed according to academics by Ham (who, having seen his father Noah naked, a symbolic castration according to the psycho-analysts, was chased away and cursed). The crowds join him, we don't know how, and also the scribes and the Pharisees with whom he had just been debating about what is 'pure and impure' (impurity is that which comes out of the mouth rather than that which enters it!) The context is already one of great tension and violence. Some are trying to arrest him. Soon after will come the account of the mysterious feeding of the starving crowd (the multiplication of the loaves) followed by Peter's profession of faith ('So who do you say that I am?') which comes immediately before the first mention of the Passion.

The same account exists in the gospel of Mark but without the participation of the disciples. Luke seems to have omitted it, which for academics is an argument in favour of the historical veracity of the episode, since Luke had a tendency to forget anything in Jesus' words or behaviour which was too coarse or difficult to handle for his Greek public (Emmanuel Carrère).

Elsewhere the translation reads 'it is not good...' instead of 'it is not fair to take the bread...' Of course, the controversy could centre on the first words spoken by Jesus after he had been silent for quite some time: why only the lost sheep of the people of Israel? Jesus was born into a special race like his cousin John the Baptist... he may not yet be aware of the universality of his mission. Is he already the universal Christ? Did Matthew still doubt it? He is writing for his community, that of James in Jerusalem, which has long kept the Jewish customs and initiations. James, 'brother' of Jesus, unlike Paul, has not yet discovered the universality of the message, the Way.

After prolonged controversy and confrontations mainly with Paul, the debate (about obligatory circumcision for all believers) would be settled definitively by Peter in the Acts of the Apostles chapter 10 with a dream about food (even that which is impure may be eaten) and the conversion of the pagan centurion Cornelius. This is the famous scene of what came to be called the Council of Jerusalem, and Paul's victory (see also Acts chapter 15) with acceptance for non-Jews that they need not be circumcised prior to being baptised.

2 – Here and now

If we put ourselves in the place of one of the disciples, it would appear that everyone is tired, including Jesus and everyone is trying to go into their room in order to rest. Did they find a house with a bit of privacy? The arrival of this woman seems very inappropriate and unexpected. How did she get there and did she know about the coming of this Jesus, who she named Saviour, son of David?

Her cry intervenes as a cry for help, almost animal-like in intensity. Her daughter is on the point of being lost to her. She bows down. As if without her knowledge (involuntarily?), 'it's stronger than her', we would say nowadays. What is faith? Surely Jesus has already done enough that day, the disciples seem to be thinking? She is going too far. 'She's driving us nuts, send her away! Can't we give him a bit of peace and quiet!'

As we try to live the situation as if we were there in the here and now (a sequence of shots in a film at the cinema?), it is the unexpected which bowls us over. Jesus' phrase seems even more violent, as if he is profoundly surprised by it himself. The disciples (us?) are doubtless knocked sideways, as were the scribes and the Pharisees who didn't manage to understand and get to grips with this bewildering personality.

3 - The effectiveness of crumbs

From where did this woman get such audacity? And why did she have this irrepressible desire to see Jesus and to meet him? It reminds us a bit of a certain Zacchaeus.... and that incredible response from the little puppy who doesn't want to leave anything to waste...the words of a mad woman or of a buffoon. Answering 'Tit for tat', as one might say!

I allow myself also to emphasise Jesus' silence before he comes out with these words, which seem so provocative and scandalous to us. A silence of stunned astonishment faced with the unexpected words of this strange woman. Perhaps he is shocked, wondering what to do and how to respond. Or maybe it's a form of exhaustion? After all, he is a human being just like us! But we need to guard against a facile pop psychology, as if we could discern the inner person of this Jesus who already evades any predictable pattern.

This moment of silence may well have been similar to the silence he observes while tracing characters in the sand without saying anything while men accuse the adulterous woman, or the silence before he asks for a drink from the Samaritan woman. That silence that Jesus demonstrates which believers can interpret as a brief 'tête-a-tête' with the 'Other', whom he calls 'Father'? A prayer?

What follows is something totally new. It ranks alongside 'the Creation' as one of my friends puts it. 'God is incredibly creative.' (Timothy Radcliffe). And isn't that creativity (which we mistakenly call a miracle) to do with the existence of the Canaanite, her cry and her response, rather than Jesus' decision? But you could also make the case for the inventiveness being Jesus' with his first response seeming to be so shocking? The healing, which follows and is the precedent of other examples of healing mediated by Him surely lies in the fact of a mother's trust. But what else occurs which evades his initiative? The J factor? Is it in this particular case a woman who comes forwards and stands up tall (like Zacchaeus who climbs the sycamore tree)?

And Jesus who reveals that he is the Christ when faced with the unexpected? And who bows down? It is she who prostrates herself but He who draws near. Using a lot of poetic licence we might imagine that he identifies with the clown or the puppy who come to lick up the crumbs fallen from the table (derived from theology not psychology....)? It reminds me of the Idiot by Dostoevsky. For believers (the Canaanite?) the washing of feet at the last supper? And immediately afterwards what happens, happens to the little dogs and to the lost sheep not only of Israel but of the world over. All are fed thanks to the crumbs of the Canaanite... a crowd is fed immediately following this text. Would the Father on high refuse his children bread? And particularly the least of the least, the 'buffoons' (Jesus himself? What a scandal!)? Isn't this a little known source of Christian humour? All perspective turned upside down. Humour is a serious business!?... The God and Father of Jesus Christ bigger and more unexpected than all our human reasoning as far as the apostle Matthew is concerned!

As an appendix and to take the story still further in these times of violence should we not invoke the incredible faith of Job, placed in a situation which goes beyond anything which can be described in words? Frédéric Rognon, philosopher of the faculty of protestant theology in Strasbourg, writes about Jesus as a non-violent but very human being 'as an example: his encounter with the Canaanite woman; she asks him to save her daughter and he replies (that which we know already)...it makes us smile nowadays, but in those days the dog was the most despised animal along with the pig. It was a very strong form of verbal violence and it was the woman's reply which recalls Jesus to his earlier non-violence. Thus the gospel shows us one way of curbing our inner demons.' Some have even observed that in this case it is possibly the Canaanite who is preaching to Jesus?!

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The Stranger

Who is she
that stranger
who has come up to me?

What is she asking for,
that stranger
besides the well being of her daughter?

Suddenly through the voice
of this woman
the prophet hears his Father
confiding in him
his new mission,
that of welcoming
all who have come from elsewhere
as if they had always been family.
Love is language.

Love spoke on that day.
That woman
was its voice
in the humdrum of the world.

Louise Vandière

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