

When Silence is not Golden

Matthew 15:21-28

He answered her not a word. Do you know what that feels like? You plead with God, beg God for help, but the only response you get is silence. Anything would be better than that silence. But sometimes that's all you seem to get.

He answered her not a word. That's the first of four times in this story that Matthew tells us 'Jesus answered . . .' This first time Jesus answers with silence. Strange when you think about it, considering all the words that fill the 66 books of the Bible, and the billions of words have been preached on these words. But here, when a woman is in desperate need of help for her daughter, Jesus answers her not a word!

Well, it was perhaps presumptuous of her to think Jesus would help her anyway. She has at least three strikes against her before she starts.

One, her daughter was possessed by a demon, we are told. In those days this was a common way of diagnosing an illness. And people would have seen the mother as somehow being tainted by the illness of her daughter. She was unclean!

Second, the woman came from the region of Tyre and Sidon. She was a Canaanite – a Gentile. From the Jews' point of view she was a foreigner, an outsider. She had no claims on Jesus the Jew, no right to make any request of him.

Third, the woman was a woman, and that was enough in those days to diminish her person, to make her something less in the eyes of a male-dominated society – which meant she was less, it was presumed, in the eyes of God.

So, she had no grounds for expecting to be heard – no grounds, that is, in herself . . . but all the grounds in the world in the loving and compassionate Jesus. So she comes believing, trusting in him, begging him for the help she knows he can give. She doesn't ask for herself, but for her precious daughter. We hear her faith and hope expressed in her words: Lord. Son of David.

What a great confession of faith this foreigner . . . this *Gentile* woman makes.

But, Jesus answers her not a word.

And, the disciples are no help. They don't want to let her into their closed circle. She's an outsider. She'd better remain an outsider. She's beginning to annoy them with her constant cries for help.

The original Greek says she kept on asking for help, and the disciples kept on saying to Jesus: 'Send her away, she's bothering us'. Probably what they meant was: Do what she wants and get rid of her. They don't really care about the woman, or her daughter; they just want her out of their hair.

Followers of Jesus can be so cruel and unfeeling sometimes, can't they?

And, yet, Jesus answers THEM! This is the second time we're told Jesus answered. The woman he answered with silence; the disciples he answers with a reminder of his mission.

God has sent him on a rescue mission, and that mission is to Israel. Jesus is an obedient Son. He's focused on doing the will of the Father; the disciples shouldn't distract him. He's come to seek the lost sheep of the house of Israel.

Well, the woman hears Jesus' two answers. She hears his silence and she hears his mission is to the house of Israel. That ought to be enough to turn her away.

Does she give up and go home despondent . . . sad . . . feeling rejected . . . depressed and fearful for her daughter's future?

No. She doesn't. Instead, she breaks through the closed circle of the disciples and falls down before Jesus . . . she throws herself at his feet . . . in the posture of worship.

Truly she is a disciple – a believer – this woman. She may be an outcast, a Gentile, a woman with nothing to recommend her. But, she's a worshipper. She has nothing to bring to her Lord and King, only her trust in his grace and mercy. 'Lord', she says simply, 'help me'.

Help me.

And, now, we're told Jesus answers for the third time in the story. Now, he answers the woman. And this answer is worse than silence . . . if anything can be worse than silence. This answer is brutal, crushing: 'It's not fair to take the children's bread and give it to the little dogs under the table'.

I reckon that would have been enough for me. I would have given up. But, this woman, this amazing, trusting, courageous, persistent woman – how she must have loved her daughter – this woman seizes on the words of Jesus and feeds them right back to him: 'True Lord, true. But even the little dogs belong to the household; even the little dogs are part of the family. They get fed too'.

She listens very carefully to Jesus' words, doesn't she?

And, somehow, she hears the promise in his words. She is so sure of her Lord. I'm reminded of Martin Luther, when his friend Melancthon was seriously ill. "I collected a whole bag-full of God's promises", he said, "and shook the lot of them in God's ear".

So, this woman clings to the promises of God concerning the coming Son of David, the Lord's Messiah, the one who would bear our griefs and carry our sorrows, the one by whose stripes we are healed.

This Gentile woman honoured the sacredness of Jesus' mission. She didn't deny Jesus had to rescue the lost sheep of the house of Israel. She wasn't disputing that. But, she reminded Jesus of the extent of that house; she reminded him the prophets had foretold one day that 'house' would grow to include also Gentile believers, not just Jews.

And Jesus? He wasn't angered, or annoyed, by her words. It doesn't seem so. It seems like he was glad to have his words turned back on himself, glad of the woman's persistence, glad of the clear evidences of her faith and trust in him.

And, so, we see Jesus honouring her for honouring him. He praises her and grants her plea. 'Woman', he answered one more time, 'great is your faith. Your request is granted.'

This was Jesus' fourth and final answer. In the end his No was turned into a Yes . . . a blessed, healing, wonderful Yes. In great faith she put her trust in a great grace, the grace of God in Jesus Christ.

The grace of God in Jesus which is for both the little children and the little dogs.

The grace of God . . . present in the person of the Son, Jesus Christ, in whom all the promises of God have their Yes and Amen. Jesus himself, in our place and for us, experienced the silence of God. The pain of no answer, no response. Silence. He asked: 'Why have you forsaken me?' No answer. He went into death. Trusting. Trusting in the face of God's silence, that God would deliver him. His disciples left him and fled, leaving him alone, with only two criminals for company . . . and the flies and insects. His enemies mocked him: 'He trusted in God, let God deliver him'.

God DID deliver him. Brought him safely through death to life. Raised him up. Set him at his right hand. Declared to all the world: "Here is your Lord and king". Look to him and you will not be disappointed. Trust him, just as this Gentile woman did, trust him against all the odds. Trust him even in the silence.

I hope this story is an encouragement for you when you are down. You can be encouraged by the woman who hung in there when everything was against her. She braved the silence. She continued to trust in the face of opposition and seeming rejection. Because she *knew* Jesus was compassionate.

And THAT should be the greatest encouragement of all. In the end it's not this woman we should look at, not think that we have to copy her exactly to get what we want from God. That would be looking at the wrong person – the woman and yourself.

No. Look at the compassionate Jesus who hears and heals. In his word he assures us we are God's children, not dogs. Children, and if we are children then we are heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ. He calls us to suffer with him so that in the end we may be glorified with him.

At times we might not think, or feel, it, but our hard times, our pain, our sorrows, are our suffering with him and he with us. Sometimes he suffers with us in silence. Then we hang on to his word and promises . . . and we believe, whether we feel it or not.

Amen

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