

**High St Uniting Church**  
**Son of God or Son of Mary**      **Matthew 15:21 - 28**



I was attracted to a science report the other day, that detailed a surprising discovery from the James Webb Space Telescope. Images and data from a star about 1500 light years away led to calculations that gave an age estimate for the star that made it older than the universe! Even more astonishing, analysis of the composition of the star showed that it came from the remnants of an even older star. The scientists are confounded! How do you deal with that sort of finding? Do you

rely on the established information – the long-accepted age of the universe and the process of development – and question this new data, or do you take the data as a reason to question the established information?

And that is the dominant question for many people when they read or hear today's story from Matthew. We have a long-established image of Jesus, and this story gives us a Jesus we can't recognise.

Essentially, all stories in the gospels are about 'who is Jesus'? The issue with this story is the tension in our minds and our hearts between Jesus the divine, compassionate, all-knowing Son of God – the Jesus we have seen over the past 2 Sundays having compassion and feeding thousands, walking on water, and calming the storms – and Jesus the human, Jewish son of Mary. We are happy when the son of Mary is like us, being tired or being emotional, but we are less happy when he looks to be a bit too much like us in displaying anger or any mention of him having a relationship with Mary Magdalene. And we are distinctly uncomfortable in this story when the son of Mary, raised in Jewish Galilee shows racial prejudice and insults this woman from Tyre and Sidon. We are even more uncomfortable when Matthew uses the term Canaanite and our minds are taken to all those old, blood thirsty, violent stories from Joshua and Judges. Who is this Jesus in Tyre and Sidon? Where is the Jesus we like, an image supported by all the other information? The compassionate healer and openly welcoming, loving prophet. The Jesus who loves little children and shows mercy to the blind and the lame. We want the Son of God, what are we going to make of this story of the son of Mary.

Over the years I have seen so many attempts at rationalising this story. Imagining Jesus with a twinkle in his eye teasing this woman into demonstrating her faith. Or this is Jesus living out a parable to show the disciples an example of the hypocritical behaviour he criticised the Pharisees for. Or this is a lesson in humility, the woman needed to stop demanding and understand her place in the order of salvation before she could get her request. Or this is Matthew exaggerating a story to make it relevant to his community who are directly experiencing the confrontations between Jewish and Gentile members. Those explanations demonstrate the discomfort with the image of Jesus in this story as people try to cling to the traditional understanding of who Jesus is. Alternately, I've seen people use this story to challenge that tradition. This is a strong woman in Tyre forcing the son of Mary, the Jew from Galilee, to confront his prejudices. Or this is Jesus being reminded that there is faith outside of Judea.

The contradictions and tensions are before us all the time, as much as we want the traditional image of Jesus, the divine Son of God, miracle worker and loving welcomer, it's the son of Mary that we want for our salvation. The real man Jesus, who has lived a human life and a human death and understands our weakness and is now with God as intercessor to bring about our acceptability before God. But we are uncomfortable with stories of Jesus as a real man, because when he is too much like the son of Mary, he reminds us of our own weaknesses, our own failures, and foibles. Jesus' behaviour in Tyre reminds us of our tendency to justify ourselves with barriers and standards and judgement. But, as Oscar Romero said, a Gospel that doesn't discomfort us is of no value. The gospel is meant to send us on this painful, life long, but life-giving process of confronting long held traditions that are about 'God for us' instead of 'God for all'.

One of the most profound truths I was taught in Lay Preacher training is that you cannot preach unless the text has first preached to you. This text has forced me to confront the traditions that I hold that stand in the way of making the love of God available to all people. My head knowledge, which I have shared in many sermons, tells me about inclusive language, different learning styles, different worship styles and the need for new words and ways for new generations and cultures. But my heart cries tradition. Traditions of worship and behaviour and values that are as much a part of a working-class upbringing as they are a part of Reformed English Protestant worship and theology. There are ways to do things that may not be God given, but they were given by godly people and practiced for centuries so they must be right! And into that head versus heart conflict comes this story of a woman crossing boundaries of tradition to get to God. All the religious traditions that were about being the people of God, traditions that made the people of Israel different to their neighbours and built a belief that it was the traditions that made them holy, not their relationship with God or the faith they professed. Traditions that even Jesus had absorbed in his youth and held in his heart, even though his mind knew better.

Rather than being a theology shaking outlier that confronts all our ideas about Jesus, this little story is actually a great example of the tension in Jesus living out the identity we claim – that Jesus is the God man. Jesus Christ the divine one who is also Jesus of Nazareth. Son of God and Son of Mary. Jesus who insults a woman from another race but who also heals her daughter without even seeing her. And therefore, the story speaks to all of us trying to live out this dual identity that we have – being the people of God and being citizens of this country. All that Jesus teaches us and demonstrates for us in representing God in loving behaviour, open welcome, justice, and compassion should work in all aspects of our life and not be stifled by culture, or tradition, or assumptions of who is in and who is out. May the persistence, the wisdom, and the passion of this, unfortunately unnamed, woman from Tyre remind us to lower our barriers and open ourselves to all who are in need.