

Lent 2 (2024)

Looking out over a body of water, especially a sea or ocean, stretches your horizons. You imagine lands far away.

Perhaps the Pilgrim Fathers experienced this feeling as the Mayflower pulled out of port in Plymouth, England, and headed for the American continent. A world beyond their world lay before them.

And just perhaps Jesus and the disciples felt a similar sense of wonderment as they looked out over the Mediterranean Sea after entering the region of Tyre and Sidon.

In today's New Testament passage, we find them traveling northwest of Galilee going all the way to the seacoast. This is the only time recorded in the Gospels that Jesus, as least as an adult, left Jewish territory.

William Barclay comments:

“The supreme significance of the passage is that it fore-shadows the going out of the gospel to the whole world; it shows us the beginning of the end of all barriers.”

And certainly that is an important point.

Not many years later, Jesus’ kingdom message would be taken over the same waters to Asia Minor (modern-day Turkey), Greece, Rome, Spain and even to a little island off the coast of Europe called Britain.

This world-wide expansion was part of God’s plan going all the way back to Genesis. It wasn’t some Johnny-come-late idea.

God’s call of Abraham was not just for him and his offspring alone but so blessing, healing, rescue could flow to all the families of the earth.

“And in thy seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed,” we hear God tell the patriarch in Genesis 22:18.

In today’s Old Testament lesson taken from 1 Kings 8, we likewise get a glimpse of the larger world, the world outside Abraham’s lineal descent, the world beyond boundaries.

In verse 41, King Solomon at the dedication of the temple in Jerusalem prays that God would hear and honor the petition of the **“stranger, that is not of thy people Israel.”**

He foresees a foreigner, perhaps many of them, coming to the Temple, offering petitions to the God of this House.

Now, fast forward to the story of the Canaanite woman who does not come to Jerusalem but to Jesus with her petition.

I don't think we should miss the significance of this shift from Jerusalem to Jesus.

The Temple in Jerusalem was the place where the living God was strangely present.

Just prior to Solomon's prayer at the Temple's dedication, after the ark of the covenant was brought in and placed in the Holy of Holies, we are told that a cloud so filled the house that it became impossible for the priests to stand and go about their work.

That 'cloud' was the shekinah, the visible manifestation of God's awesome presence.

The Temple was the place heaven and earth overlapped.

But what about Jesus? /// Could not the same be said of Him? /// He was the new, better Temple, the temple not made with hands.

He was to render the old Temple in Jerusalem redundant.

Following Jesus' death on the cross, we are told that the veil separating the Holy of Holies from the rest of the Temple was rent in twain, torn from the top to the bottom, thus signaling that the way into God's presence had been opened to all and sundry, in particular to those who believed.

“Behold the tabernacle of God is with men,” John hears the Almighty call out in Revelation 21.

That being the case, what we find this Canaanite woman doing is full of significance.

There is only one problem, if you want to call it that. She comes knocking at the door of the new Temple – the Temple not made with hands, Jesus – ahead of schedule.

That is what all this business about Jesus not being sent but to the lost sheep of the house of Israel is all about.

God's plan of redemption had an order. To the Jew first . . . then out to everyone else.

But that did not stop this woman from coming. Like Jacob wrestling with the Angel of the Lord in the Old Testament, she just wouldn't turn loose until she received the blessing she sought.

She even engages with Jesus in a wordplay over little pet dogs that eat the crumbs from their master's table. She is as clever as she is persistent.

More than that she displays remarkable faith. Her eyes were opened to who Jesus was when many of His own countrymen were closed. Her faith was strong when theirs was either tepid or non-existent.

Her faith had content. It was more than positive thinking. She addresses Jesus as Lord and calls Him “Son of David”. The latter is a title for Israel’s Messiah; the first a title used for God.

Her faith paid off. Not only is her petition answered -- her daughter is healed long-distance -- but she receives from Jesus the highest commendation given anybody in the Gospels: **“O woman, great is thy faith: be it unto thee even as thou wilt.”**

This Canaanite woman tells us the Gospel is for all people. People out of various cultures find themselves drawn to it and embraced by it.

That should give us in the church great confidence. The Word with which we have been entrusted is alive and active, transformative and transportable across cultural and racial lines.

Ultimately what attracts people to come into the tent of fellowship, the Church, is not clownish antics, cleaver marketing, over-the-top light shows or any contrived, manmade device, but the Word of God faithfully proclaimed.

I was reminded of this some years ago when I visited the church of the great 19th century preacher Charles Spurgeon in London, the Metropolitan Baptist Tabernacle.

It is located over the Thames in one of the worst parts of London, near the entrance to the Elephant and Castle Underground stop. Taxi drivers, I am told, turn off their for-hire lights when going through this area.

The services in this church are very austere. The hymns are old and richly theological in content. Nothing is ‘seeker friendly’, yet the place fills up, including the balconies, when the doors are opened.

Why? /// Because the Word of God is preached faithfully and earnestly.

People hunger for that Word whether they know it or not. It's the real deal. It has the power to transform the lives of individuals as well as whole communities.

Paul says as much in the opening chapter of 1 Thessalonians: **“For our gospel came not unto you in word only, but also in power, and in the Holy Ghost.”**

Tom Wright compares announcing the Gospel out there in the pagan Greco-Roman world to telling a joke in a foreign language. You are surprised when people get it and laugh.

Well, something like this happened in Thessalonica. When the Gospel was announced, some got it. They “turned from idols to serve the living and true God, and to await his son from heaven” (1 Thessalonians 1:9)

Increasingly, we find ourselves living in a culture that is pagan to the core, one that is not that different from the one in which the Gospel was first announced.

How do respond? Do we throw in the towel? Say, “It’s no use. The devil has won. Christianity is stale and dead?”

No, we take the Gospel out, we proclaim and live it, with great confidence. We dare to be boldly countercultural. We leave the results to the Holy Spirit.

Imagine Jesus and the disciples looking out over the Mediterranean. There they see a mission field yet to be opened. We need to do the same.

A hymn by Samuel Wolcott puts us on the right track.

Christ for the world we sing;
the world to Christ we bring
with loving zeal:
the poor and them that mourn,
the faint and overborne,
sin-sick and sorrow-worn,
for Christ doth heal.

Here are the main points of today's sermon,
the 'takeaways':

Don't let the challenges of today take away
your confidence in the Gospel. Go about your
work as a follower of Jesus Christ boldly and
expectantly.

Secondly, never forget that the Gospel is for
all. The barriers of race and place have been
knocked down. See everyone you meet as one
for whom Christ died and as a candidate for
sainthood.

Thirdly and finally, remember the importance of faith.

Christian faith is more than accepting a set of theological propositions as true. That is certainly important, but it is not the faith that brings peace of soul and mind. It is not the faith that brings victory. That faith is trust in a Person, Christ the Lord.

Turn your eyes on Him. Walk into His arms yourself. Then and only then will you be able to lead others in.

Faith brought victory in the life of the Canaanite woman and her afflicted daughter. It can bring victory in your life. /// Have faith in God.

