

Blessed are those who trust in the Lord. Whose trust is the Lord.

Jeremiah 17:7

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It is one of the most remarkable stories in all of Scripture. And outside of the stories of Christ's Nativity, and the stories of Holy Week and Good Friday, and, of course, the story of the Resurrection, it is one of the most compelling stories in all of the Gospels. But, maybe at the very same time, it's one of the most troubling. And, at the centre of the remarkable, compelling, troubling, story that we hear each and every year on the Second Sunday in Lent there is this Canaanite woman; this stranger; this foreigner; who is, without a doubt, the great hero of this story. Far more heroic in this story than Jesus is, in my opinion. And light years ahead of his disappointingly whiny self-centred complacent disciples. She is the hero of this story because of her persistence; because of her refusal to just give up, as the disciples wanted her to do. She is the hero of this story because of her great love for her daughter, and what she is prepared to face because of that love; because of her courage. Because of her faith. Her 'great faith, as Jesus tells us.

But she is also the hero of this story because she stands in the place of countless sorrowing, grieving, fearful, desperate women in all places and times; who in so many ways have been, and continue to be, the great heroes of the human story. Even to this very day, even to this very moment, defiantly standing up in the face of violence and war and injustice and cruelty; protecting their daughters and their sons, at whatever price they must pay; seeking food and shelter and medical care. Desperately, fearfully, courageously, even this very day. In Kyiv. In Kharkiv. In Odessa. Just as women have throughout the sad, sorrowful, unfolding of the human story. In all times and in all places. In Aleppo. In Kigali. In Warsaw. In Kamloops. And Kootenay. And Williams Lake. Unnumbered, because there are just too many to count.

So while this remarkable story is very firmly set within the context of first century Palestine – with its long history of social and religious animosity between the people of Israel and the Canaanites¹ – it is a story that plays out in every time and in every place: wherever hatred and animosity close hearts to the Other; wherever hatred and animosity close our hearts to those who are different from us in the thousand and one different ways in which we differ from each other.

And like the story unfolding this day in Ukraine, this is a borderland story.² It's a story that unfolds in that in-between land between Israel and Phoenicia, in a time of rising nationalism and violence; in an area into which each wished to expand.³ Just a couple of

¹ ... while of the Phoenicians it is known the Tyrians have been most of all in the same ill disposition towards us."

Against Apion, Flavius Josephus, translated by William Whiston: <http://www.gutenberg.org/dirs/2/8/4/2849/2849.txt>

² There are different hypotheses as to the etymological origins of the name of Ukraine. The most widespread hypothesis theorizes that it comes from the old Slavic term for "borderland", as does the word *Krajina*, a Slavic toponym, meaning 'frontier' or 'march'. The term is related with *kraj* or *krai*, originally meaning "edge" and today denoting a region or province, usually distant from the metropole. During most of the 20th century, Ukraine was referred to in the English-speaking world with the definite article as "the Ukraine". This is because the word "ukraina" means "borderland" and translates literally as "the borderlands"; this is similar to "Nederlanden", which means "low lands" and is translated as "the Netherlands". Since Ukraine's declaration of independence in 1991, the use of the definite article in the name has become rarer and style guides advise against its use. According to US ambassador William Taylor, "the Ukraine" now implies disregard for Ukrainian sovereignty. The official Ukrainian position is that "the Ukraine" is incorrect, both grammatically and politically.

"*Linguistic divides: Johnson: Is there a single Ukraine?*". *The Economist*. 5 February 2014.

"*'Ukraine' or 'the Ukraine'? It's more controversial than you think*". *Washington Post*. 25 March 2014.

Geoghegan, Tom (7 June 2012), "*Ukraine or the Ukraine: Why do some country names have 'the'?*", *BBC News Magazine*, BBC

³ Gerd Theissen, *The Gospels in Context: Social and Political History in the Synoptic Tradition*, Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991, pp. 61-80

decades after the time of this story, violence will break out in this region as Jewish nationalists attack non-Jewish cities at the time of their rebellion against Roman rule.⁴ So this is both a story of that time and a story of our time.

But perhaps the one thing that makes this story more than just a symbol of fallen, broken humanity is found in how Jesus responds to this poor woman's great faith. Seeming first to ignore; then later to dismiss her cries. It has been said that this is the only instance in the Gospels "in which someone in conversation with Jesus leads him to change his mind."⁵ Maybe to see what the Father had been telling him all along. What if this one story is part of that long process that Jesus had to go through, beginning as a child, to learn who he was and what he had been sent to do? That process that we saw just a week ago when we were reminded of his 40-day journey into the wilderness, his 40-day struggle to know the Will of the Father; to know which path to take; which road to walk. That long process to understand more fully what His mission was. Maybe even to understand better who he was. And what if this one story is part of that long process that Jesus had to go through to see his mission not just as a mission to the lost sheep of the house of Israel, as he tells her, but to lost sheep in every place and time. Including you and me. Maybe it was her faith that challenged him to move to a place of deeper understanding and compassion.

But what does this story tell us today? Well, hopefully it challenges us to make sure that our hearts and eyes and ears are never closed to the cries of those in need; no matter who it is that is crying out for help. Moving us to compassion for the Gentile and for the stranger and for the outcast and, even, for the enemy. That as much as they may differ from us; as much as they may have once hurt us or bothered us or may have even broken our heart; we are called by Christ to rise above the instinct that comes to every age and every time to reject and dismiss those who are different.

And hopefully this story of her great faith tells us of the importance of never giving up; of trusting, no matter what comes, that all things are held in the hand, within the providence, of a loving, compassionate, patient, forgiving God who never closes his ears or eyes to our cries. And hopefully we never forget the words of this unnamed but long-remembered Canaanite woman, who, in so many ways, is our mother in faith; words framed by love and hope and humility. Because humility is the key for us today just as it was for her that day. Because this is a story not of rights or privileges; not of getting whatever we demand. This is a story of Grace. Just as your story is a story of Grace. A story of how God, in Christ, never gives us just what we desire or deserve⁶ but always so much more.

And what if, in the desperate faith of this poor Canaanite woman, who refused to give up, Jesus saw the kind of faith upon which his Church would be built. The kind of faith that his disciples will one day find in their own hearts, many years later when they no longer hide behind locked doors in fear. The kind of faith that they will use to change the world. And what if, after we have thought on these things; what if the last point is simply this: that maybe we are being challenged to look deeply into our souls. To find the compassion that has the power to heal broken hearts. And the faith that has the power to change the world.

⁴ A. Kasher, *Jews and Hellenistic Cities in Eretz-Israel*, TSAJ 21, Tubingen: Mohr, 1990.

⁵ Richard Bauckham, *Gospel Women: Studies of the Named Women in the Gospels*, Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 2002, page 43.

⁶ Collect for Trinity 12, BCP page 236.