This reading from Matthew’s gospel is fairly troubling, really.

It’s a story I really struggle with; because in it   
I meet a Jesus that I’m not quite sure how to take.   
There is little sign of gentle Jesus, meek and mild.

In the past I’ve tried very hard   
to soften the way Jesus comes across in this story.   
I’ve tried very hard to domesticate him,   
to make him a little bit more palatable.

But if we do justice to the story as we’ve received it,   
then the Jesus we meet is tired, grumpy, prejudiced   
and just a little bit superior.

In this story it seems that Jesus is having a bad day.   
We wouldn’t begrudge that of Peter, or Thomas,   
or any of the disciples.   
In fact, we quite like it when they demonstrate   
that they’re as human as *we* are. It gives us hope.   
But it’s hard, isn’t it, to be confronted with evidence   
of the humanness of *Jesus*.

How easily we forget that Jesus was a human being of his time.   
Despite the fact that he often defied social convention,   
he was a Jewish male living within the societal constraints   
and prejudices of his day.

His encounter with the Canaanite woman has   
a whole lot of undercurrents which are largely invisible   
from our 21st century perspective. She is a Gentile.   
When she came to Jesus –   
a Jewish Galilean wandering teacher and healer –   
two wildly different social worlds collided.

Judith Gundry-Volf writes this, by way of explanation:

From Jesus’ standpoint as a Jewish carpenter by race and by trade,   
the differences [between them] would have been sore points. … There was a history of economic and political oppression of Jews by the cities of Tyre and Sidon. … The Jewish farmers produced most of the food for the city dwellers. But the latter bought up and stored so much of the harvest for themselves each season and during times of crisis that the country folk did not have enough. Tyre and Sidon also posed a political threat to the Jews because the cities pursued a policy of territorial expansion … which at times proved successful. So when a … Hellenist woman from this region seeks out help from Jesus, who has deliberately withdrawn from the public eye, her mission seems doomed from the start.[[1]](#footnote-1)

And so, he refuses the request.   
His reply seems to indicate that Jesus’ mission,   
at least for now is restricted to the Jews, not the Gentiles.   
‘By the figure of speech that Jesus uses he appears   
not just to refuse the woman but to insult her.   
The epithet “dogs” for gentiles had derogatory connotations;   
dogs roamed the streets scavenging for food,   
and the Jews considered them unclean animals.’[[2]](#footnote-2)   
It was another way of saying:

“First let the poor people in the Jewish rural areas be satisfied.   
For it is not good to take poor people’s food and throw it to the rich Gentiles in the cities.”[[3]](#footnote-3)

This is where my attempt to domesticate Jesus really kicks in.   
I can’t bear that he would be so rude, so discriminatory,   
so un-politically correct.   
And so I, and others before me,   
have argued that Jesus use of the word “dog”   
is better translated as puppy. It gives it a much more inviting tone.

Or, I try another tack, making this conversation   
an obvious round of verbal jousting,   
where the woman *knows* that Jesus is inviting her to take him on,   
drawing her into debate, challenging her to do her best.

But even trying both of these tactics,   
the contrast between children and dogs cannot be avoided.   
It’s not like he’s compared her to a greyhound. This is an insult.   
The woman is being told that she has no right   
to expect Jesus to help her.

To *her* credit, she doesn’t let a small thing like rejection   
stand in her way.   
She absolutely refuses to be excluded   
and so she takes *his* metaphor and uses it to argue her own point.   
Marginalised communities have done this from time immemorial.

Drawing – most probably – from her own experience as a mother,   
she argues that during mealtime around the table,   
even the lowliest members of her household receive nourishment.   
The feeding of the children and dogs are not mutually exclusive.   
Both the children and can be fed at the same time.   
‘The Gentiles can have the bread of the messianic blessings,   
and they can have it now.’ ‘She does not appeal to any right …   
[instead she appeals] to mercy. …   
She believes that divine mercy knows no bias.   
And she believes that Jesus will show this kind of mercy.   
As she expresses this faith in him, he also begins to believe.’[[4]](#footnote-4)

She is the only person recorded in the gospels   
to best Jesus in a debate.   
A courageous mother, who, for the sake of her child   
was willing to cross all the boundaries   
that would ordinarily hold her back;   
a woman whose name we do not know.

To *his* credit, Jesus is humble enough to hear the word of God   
coming from a most unexpected source.   
He becomes willing to engage with her as a person,   
not as an upper class, wealthy gentile oppressor.   
And from there, her daughter is healed,   
and Jesus’ entire mission shifts – to include the Gentiles.

And suddenly, the Jesus of this story isn’t so unpalatable anymore. Because his humanity and his humility are interwoven.   
He is moved by a woman who draws him   
beyond the conventions of his day.   
Her faith in divine mercy challenges him,   
it reveals something of God to him, it expands him.

Jesus’ encounter with the Canaanite woman reminds us that   
‘Redemptive people can come to us in the unlikeliest of shapes.’[[5]](#footnote-5)

At first glance this encounter looks like a **transaction**.

A person with need comes to a person who can meet that need.

They barter a bit about terms and conditions,   
and then the need is met.

But actually, this encounter is **reciprocal**.

Jesus is led from an either/or way of viewing that mission  
into a both/and.  
He is shown a vision of God’s grace and of his own mission  
that was larger than even he imagined.

That is the woman’s gift to him.

And he responds out of that grace.  
Her daughter is healed.

And his mission is expanded to include the Gentiles.   
That’s you and me.

So thanks be to God for unlikely people   
who reveal the love of God.   
May we, like Jesus, have the grace to recognise them.

1. Judith M Gundry-Volf, *A Spacious Heart,* 22. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Judith M Gundry-Volf, *A Spacious Heart,* 24. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Theissen, quoted by Gundry-Volf, 24. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Gundry-Volf, 26,27. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Gail Goodwin (spoken by the character Adrian Bonner), *Evensong* [↑](#footnote-ref-5)