*Thus says the Lord GOD, who gathers the outcasts of Israel, I will gather others to them besides those already gathered. (Isaiah 56)*

People who go to church might consider themselves as those who are ‘already gathered’. We live with a constant expectancy that others might join us. But it isn’t always like that. Once we were not ‘gathered’, there might have been a time when we didn’t go to church. Maybe we were very little and don’t remember that time, but if that time wasn’t so long ago then it might be helpful to recall how it felt to make that first attempt to walk through the doors of a church, to cross that threshold, to take a step inside from the outside. Its not just the building that poses the challenge, its who we find inside. ‘Will I be made welcome’, ‘will they be friendly’, ‘will I be good enough?’

The prophet Isaiah speaks clearly about God’s intended purpose to gather all people into a ‘house of prayer’, indeed not just a house of prayer, but a ‘holy mountain.’ Anyone who ‘joins with the Lord’, who ‘loves the name of the Lord’ are welcomed. Jesus seems to reiterate this message by his option to be with those who are outcast. Time and time again he makes a beeline to those who are being shunned or ignored or even being told to go away.

So what on earth is happening in today’s Gospel passage from Matthew? A Canaanite woman comes to him – here’s an opportunity to mix with someone from outside his regular group – but he ignores her. Then he eventually does answer her and he indirectly refers to her as a dog.

Calling Gentiles "dogs" was a form of abuse. We call it racism. Some commentaries suggest Jesus was being playful; the word for dog is said to be diminutive; i.e. "puppy." Others suggest Jesus was testing the woman's faith. Or, perhaps he was just using a figure of speech, and we read racism into it. Whichever way you read these commentaries, there seems to be a need to explain away the insult, probably because it hints at racism. What is going on here?

Jesus leaves Jewish territory to go to Tyre. He goes against social expectations three times. He heals a Gentile. He heals a female. He heals a child. When approached by the woman, Jesus responds with what may have been a stock Jewish man’s reply. It was the inherited racism of his day and culture. He calls the woman a "dog" and says God's blessing is not for her. The woman calls him to account.

She challenges his whole perception. "But she answered him, Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table.”  This is an extraordinarily powerful response.

The woman does not call him to account by quoting law, or logic. She does not call him a racist. She takes his little story; ‘Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs.' and uses it against him. She embellishes the story. She teases out his own humanity when she talks about the dogs under the table, and the crumbs and the children. He is exposed to a contradiction between his own compassionate self, and the attitude of his story.

Maybe there is an incidental lesson here. Story, and the meeting of people, is perhaps the strongest antidote to our own inherent racisms. Story and people, are far more powerful than logic and ethics at this point. They operate at something of the same visceral level as our race-based fears and prejudices.

The latest news about the Syrian refugees reminded me of what the Bishop of Ely said a few years ago: ‘The Bible tells us to love our neighbour, but many more times to love the stranger. The Syrian refugees, whether they have made it as far as Europe or not, are our sisters and brothers. We need to offer a Biblical welcome. The refugees’ burden of fear, loss and deprivation is our burden. We must find a language of welcome, not suspicion.”

We might ponder what a Biblical welcome looks like; maybe the verses in Isaiah might help us.

Faced with the woman’s reply, Jesus immediately repents. He turns, changes, immediately taking on board the implication of what she has said. And heals the child.

For those who worry about Jesus tempted as we are but without sin (Hebrews 4:15), it is in this action that Jesus' sinlessness shines. Learning something of himself, something new, he immediately puts it into action. He is no hard core racist. He is not reluctant to abandon his preconceived notions. Called to account by God, he responds immediately.

The only time in scripture that Jesus loses an argument, he loses it to a foreign woman identified with three enemies of his people. This encounter is an exercise in possibility.

Maybe the Canaanite woman’s story is not about what faith is, some sort of definition for all times and places, but what faith looks like in action.. Name all of the reasons why her faith could be considered great, and then ask, what do you think? What resonates with you, today, and why? Then we are demonstrating the dynamism of faith. That faith is not a static statement of status quo confessions, but lays claim on how you are in the world, how you choose to be, how you decide to live, in each specific moment of your life.

In this regard, faith is not a fixed collection of beliefs but a state of being. Your faith is great, not because of what you do, but because of who you are.

The longer reading that includes verses 10-20 just preceding this story may be joined to this one by the themes of clean and unclean, and inside and outside. Much like the story of the Canaanite woman, Jesus' parable raises questions about the understanding of where the boundaries of God's mercies are to be located. Traditional ways of locating what is unclean or outside are called into question as the Canaanite woman calls for a new understanding and a new heart as the origin and centre of God's ways among us.

The story of the woman who as an outsider experiences God's mercy and so challenges a too-narrow tradition that would want to restrict God's mercies to a chosen few, invites a re-examination of our hearts and call us to a new appraisal of the expansive reach of God's mercies.