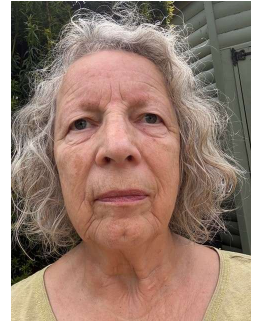


Who Did Jesus Come For?

There's a gospel narrative in which Jesus he has deliberately travelled to a part of the world where the people are Gentiles.

A woman needs his help. She's a gentile, a woman, so she knows that this group of Jews will treat her as if she is no better than a dog – an animal they regarded as little better than vermin. It's likely that the Jews travelling with Jesus, will have had those stereotypes as unthinking, learned parts of their cultural response to this woman. These days we'd use words like 'racism' and 'misogyny'. But she is desperate. Her child is ill. She has total faith that this man can help. She needs to ask, to stop him in his tracks and appeal to him, beg him for help. And she knows what she is likely to attract – the dog thing.



Jesus has just been talking about what defiles a person and what doesn't. Defilement, he says, is about what comes out of one's mouth rather than what goes into it. At first he ignores the woman. Then he says that he was sent 'only for the lost sheep of Israel'. So not for this gentile, this foreigner, this woman.

I find it intriguing to wander – and wonder - about the idea that Jesus was both man and God. This gospel story is one of those places where I find myself asking 'what does he know?' Does he know that this statement is not true, or not the whole truth, or does the woman's begging him to help her suffering daughter change his attitude? Is he setting up an encounter, like a live parable, in order that his actions not only heal the child, but teach his followers – including us? Or is he discovering the extent of his mission in the moment, in conversation with this foreign woman?

Whichever, Jesus and this gentile woman dance an exposition of generosity. She trusts that he is not a xenophobic racist misogynist. He knows, or he realises, that he can help. He adopts the racist attitude in order to overturn it. She is practised in receiving racism from Jews, and she has the wit to meet it. 'Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table.' He is willing to be met. He accepts her counter-attack: 'Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.' In spite of his statement 'I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel', he has not come only to them, to his own people, he has come for everyone. Which is why he is always ready to heal – it is the asking, the turning to him for help, which makes the grace accessible.