

Matthew | Rethinking Joshua

Fellowship@10, 16 August 2026

Alison Sampson ~ Matthew 15:10-28

‘I’m from one of the oldest families,’ he said. ‘We’ve been here since the beginning.’ And with that he effectively erased 60,000 years of continuous living culture, just as his Irish ancestors had tried to erase the people from the land. He’s a lovely guy, straightforward and well-meaning, and totally oblivious to what he had just done.

This is what happens when you’re raised in a colony. You become blind to the colonised and your own complicity; you defend your own righteousness and vehemently deny your racism; and you justify yourself through contempt for those dogs who can’t get their lives together.

‘They should be grateful,’ said someone else. ‘Without us, they wouldn’t have proper food and medicine, or the Bible. It’s just pathetic how they keep asking for handouts.’

‘Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon,’ cried the Canaanite woman. Maybe the torment was addiction or poverty, or profound dislocation or grief. Maybe it was PTSD or rheumatic heart disease, or the scars caused by imprisonment or sexual violence or forced removal, or some other demon of the colonised. Whatever, the girl desperately needed healing and her mother was driven to beg.

But he did not answer her at all.

Maybe he was thinking, I’m from one of the oldest families. A son of Abraham, from the tribe of Judah, descended from King David himself. This is the promised land: we’ve been here since the beginning. And with that he effectively erased tens of thousands of years of continuous Canaanite culture, and dismissed this woman from his awareness.

But she persisted. So his disciples came and urged him, ‘Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us.’ He replied, ‘I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.’ He still wasn’t talking directly to her; perhaps he was confused or offended by her demand.

For he knew that his namesake, Joshua, had carried out a holy war against people like her. Yes, his namesake. For Jesus’ name is Joshua. That is, we read a Bible which was written by different people over many generations in

several languages, and these texts then passed through other languages to get to us. So Jesus is the English rendition of the Greek version of a Hebrew name which in English is also rendered Joshua. Yeshua – Iesous – Jesus – Joshua: they're all the same name. And you might like to think it's a coincidence, but, yeah, probably not. The name means 'Yahweh is salvation' or 'deliverer,' and for thousands of years people have been wrestling over what this actually means.

In Joshua's understanding, it meant genocide. As it is written in Deuteronomy: "When Yahweh your God brings you into the land you are entering to possess and drives out before you many nations — the Hittites, Girgashites, Amorites, Canaanites, Perizzites, Hivites, and Jebusites, seven nations larger and stronger than you — and when Yahweh your God has delivered them over to you and you have defeated them, then you must destroy them totally. Make no treaty with them, and show them no mercy." (Deuteronomy 7:1-2).

Hundreds of years before Jesus encountered the Canaanite woman, his namesake had tried to enact these words. Enter, drive out, and destroy the seven nations living in the land. Take no captives; make no treaty; show no mercy. Yet here was this woman, very much alive, forcing herself into Jesus' consciousness as she shouted and demanded mercy.

She came and knelt before him, saying, 'Lord, help me.'

And the reason most scholars think this is a genuine story is that it's so damn offensive. We'd prefer Jesus to be infinitely loving, infinitely compassionate, infinitely kind. But that's the Jesus at the end of the story: he's not there yet. Instead, he threw a gut-punch, saying, 'It's not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs.'

In Mark's version, she's the Syro-Phoenician woman. The Palestinian woman, maybe, or the Wurundjeri woman. The Yorta Yorta woman, perhaps. But Matthew uses what was by then already an anachronism: the Canaanite woman. He's reminding his Jewish readers exactly who she is in their story. Someone who should be driven out, destroyed, shown no mercy. Someone who tempts Israel to forsake their god and go after idols. Someone for whom no true blue Israelite ever has compassion or a kind word. A filthy dog, a contaminating bitch, a louse-ridden scavenger to be avoided at all costs.

She said, 'Yes, Lord.' Whatever. 'But even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table.' Yes, Master, but who made me a dog? Who

took my land, my language, my means of production, my children? Who sets the rules and limits on my life and sends my men to jail even now? Who keeps me poor and begging, who afflicts my daughter with demons? You're the master, you hold the power: just look what you have wrought.

And in that moment, he repented. Like God repented of sending the flood, and of planning the destruction of Nineveh, this is a story of change. Maybe it was her mention of mercy which got through to him, a quality he kept harping on about. 'Blessed are the merciful,' he'd said on the mountain (5:7); 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice,' he'd said to religious sticklers (9:13): yet here he was denying mercy to someone who demanded it.

Or maybe he changed because he heard the filth spewing from his own mouth: the racist taunt which revealed the state of his heart, the violent words which defiled him. Maybe he realised that his first thought was simply cultural conditioning, as was his second and even his third: but at last he heard himself, and paused, then chose a better way.

Or maybe it was her verbal jousting, vanquishing him in debate. His namesake conquered Canaan, but this Canaanite woman bested him: and so at last he was overthrown and healed her daughter, praising her faith as he did.

I suggest that in that moment he was healed, too. Healed of the racist ethno-centrism which always leads to violence. Healed of his self-righteousness; healed of his narrowness of vision for God's mercy, generosity and grace; healed of prioritising scripture and ancestry over love. For then he stayed in the Gentile region for some time. Great crowds came to him and he lavished God's healing upon them, and they were amazed and praised the God of Israel. And when he fed the hungry crowd, there were seven baskets of crumbs left over, signalling the seven gentile nations that Joshua had once sought to destroy.

At an earlier feeding, there were twelve baskets left: one for each tribe of Israel. Shaped by his ancestry, culturally conditioned, My bread is only for Israel, he'd said. Dog, he'd said. Twelve baskets. But changed by his encounter with the Canaanite woman, now he found plenty for everyone.

Long ago, Joshua had led an invasion, hunting down the peoples of seven nations to disperse and destroy. He used every weapon available and unleashed countless demons; in God's name, he showed no mercy.

But his namesake went among them to minister, and was open to challenge and change. He caught the vastness of God's mercy, driving out the demons of coloniser and colonised, and it led to bread and healing. The coloniser decolonised and healed. The people of the land healed and fed. Communion between all peoples, all praising God, as a living reality, a picnic.

We live in a moment when the Indigenous Voice to Parliament has been rejected. Many have found in this fresh licence to speak harsh words and feed the hate. 'We've been here since the beginning.' 'This is a white nation.' 'They should be grateful.' 'Dogs.'

When we hear these voices, we are faced with a choice: In what sort of salvation do we place our faith? Joshua or Jesus? Genocide, or conversation? Conquest, or transformation? No mercy, or a picnic where there's plenty for everyone?

More, as I said when talking about Joseph last Sunday, we all make decisions about which politicians, journalists and commentators we listen to and share with others, and which we speak against or simply switch off. We make decisions about who we vote for, who we read, what we work towards, who we trust. We make decisions about which theologies we uphold, and which we leave behind. So do we listen to the Joshuas, who insist on the blessings of a violent colonisation and the foundational whiteness of our nation? Or do we follow Jesus and allow ourselves to be deeply challenged and changed?

On Friday we farewelled our sister, Margaret. She spent nearly a century being attentive to Country, and it led her to the work of reconciliation. I suggest we would do well to follow her lead, to pay deep attention to the wattle blooming, the orchid unfurling, the yellow tailed black cockatoos calling overhead. We would do well to look to the hills, and to sing with the magpies as they carol their praise. We would do well to breathe in Birrarung's morning mists, and to be shaped by the compassion of Country.

For then, perhaps, when we hear that one of her daughters is tormented, that even the dogs eat the crumbs, we might no longer question or doubt. Instead, we might find the clarity and courage to answer with Jesus, 'Great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.' And perhaps we might even offer ourselves, like Margaret, as part of the answer to this prayer. God's will be done; God's love be shown. Amen. Ω