

Animals of the Bible (9) The Dog



In the UK, many dogs serve as valuable working animals, and many more are kept as pets and regarded with great affection by their owners. Their companionship has made a great contribution to the happiness and mental health of people at times when Covid-19 restrictions have greatly reduced opportunities for human contact.

Dogs were regarded very differently in the Middle East in Biblical times. Far from being pets, they were semi-wild animals that ran through the streets at night howling and snarling, searching hungrily for scraps, bones and offal. They were detested and despised, an unclean animal to the Jews, and to call a Hebrew a dog was one of the most terrible insults possible. They are referred to 41 times in the Bible, almost without exception in a negative way.

By New Testament times, the word “dog” was often used to refer to Gentiles, and Jesus Himself is recorded as using it in this way in Mark 7 and Matthew 15. A foreign, Gentile woman had come to Him, begging for help for her daughter. The girl, we are told, had an evil spirit or demon in her. She may in fact have had epilepsy, or a mental condition, or another of the illnesses which at the time were attributed to demon possession.

Jesus answered the woman, “Let us first feed the children” (meaning the Jews), “It isn’t right to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs” (meaning Gentiles). Those words sound harsh to our ears today. Was Jesus thinking aloud, wrestling in His own mind with the prejudices of the society within which He had grown up? Or did He want to teach a lesson to

His disciples, who clearly regarded the woman as unworthy of help and, as Matthew tells us, had begged Jesus to send her away? Was there a reassuring smile on His face as He spoke to her? What was His tone of voice? We cannot know. What we do know is that He was deeply impressed by the reply she gave Him: “Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children’s leftovers!”

That was a quick-witted response, but I sense there would have been a note of anguish in the woman’s voice too. Here was a loving mother desperate to see her daughter healed, hoping against hope that this teacher from another country and culture would be able to help her.

Jesus certainly had compassion towards the woman, and did not turn her away. In Matthew’s account of this incident we are told He called her “a woman of great faith”. When she went home she found her daughter had been healed. Jesus had demonstrated that the love of God knows no bounds, and extends to Jews and Gentiles alike; indeed His grace reaches out to all human beings, regardless of nationality, colour or ethnic background – even to you and to me.

A prayer:

We are not worthy even to gather up the crumbs under your table, but it is your nature always to have mercy, and on that we depend. AMEN

(From the Prayer of Humble Access in the Methodist Worship Book, page 196)

- Rev John Barnett

Image: Christ and the Canaanite Woman, Jean-Germain Drouais (1763-1788)