

# THE HAND OF HISTORY

# ENCOUNTERS IN DIALOGUE

## BIBLE STUDY 3

**Reading: Matthew 15: 21-28, or Mark 7: 24-30.**

### COMMENT

When Jesus tries to find some rest and quiet in the area of Tyre and Sidon after a very trying and busy time, his plans to retreat into hiding are frustrated when a woman from the region comes to him with very pressing demands. In Saint Matthew's account she is a Canaanite woman; in Saint Mark's telling of the story she is a Greek or Syro-Phoenician woman. In either case, she is a Gentile, a Greek-speaker and a woman. Her religion, language, nationality and gender put her beyond the compassion of the disciples.

Jesus refuses every effort to send her away. She is direct and aggressive in demanding healing and justice and in doing so for her daughter, she is demanding them for herself too.

The dialogue between this woman and Jesus must have sounded crude and aggressive. She is a pushy woman, who forces herself into the house and with a touch of melodrama throws herself at the feet of Jesus, demanding he should heal his daughter. Then, Jesus appears to speak with contempt: he compares

his fellow Jews to "little children," while Gentiles are compared with dogs. Dogs were then regarded as unclean animals, and at the time it was a popular teaching that dogs were the only animals to be excluded with certainty from heaven.

The woman responds, perhaps with wry humour, with an image of children playing with puppy dogs, away from adult view, under the table. Jesus appreciates this encounter: her insistence on meeting Jesus face-to-face, her refusal to be oppressed because of ethnicity, religion, language or gender, as well as



her forthright way of speaking and her subliminal but humorous comparisons are all part of the drama in this story. We see this combination produces results. In Saint Mark's Gospel, Jesus responds to her way of engaging in dialogue

with him; as a consequence, when she returns home she finds her child has been healed. In Saint Matthew's Gospel, Jesus goes further – he commends her for her faith and her daughter is healed instantly.

The confrontation between this woman and Jesus, the way they enter dialogue with each other, and the consequences of that dialogue are important when we are involved in Muslim-Christian dialogue and are confronted with some of the more difficult issues that arise; the place of women in Islam; the oppression of people, whether for reasons of gender, language or ethnicity. They are important too in considering difficult issues such as religious "fundamentalism" and missionary outreach.

### CONTEXT

The woman in the readings for this section is easily dismissed as a Gentile – even though Gentiles were not one category, culture or social group. She was probably hurt by this too, and the fallacy of dismissing some groups of people by putting them all together is exposed by the way the story is told. Is she a Canaanite? Is she a Syro-Phoenician? Is

she Greek? Whatever she is, she has a good knowledge of what is going on in the Jewish community – that’s how she found Jesus for herself. Yet her identity is in danger of being given little respect by her neighbours or by the men around Jesus.

Are we in danger of having the same approach to Muslims? Do put them all into one group without listening to what they have to say about themselves, their families and their beliefs?

### WOMEN IN ISLAM

A common difficulty shared by many Christians and Westerners when it comes to discussing Islam, both as a religion and as a cultural experience, is the place of woman in Islamic societies. Muslim women are often thought of by those outside Islamic society as being oppressed, unheard and even unseen. There is an apparent trend among Islamic women to appear once again in veils and traditional clothing. Are traditional clothing and the veil symbols of oppression or an effort to return to a “pure” Islam that was fair and just to both sexes? Have women a voice and a role within Islam?

These questions are often asked from a Western perspective, without examining our own society and values, and without first asking Muslim women how they feel about these issues. We should always be aware of comparing what we consider to be the worst in one society with what we regard as the best in our society.



What is often seen as “traditional” Islamic dress code for women bears comparison with the polite dress code for women in mediaeval Europe – a dress code that continued for generations in the habits of many nuns. Many Muslim women today who wear the veil would be shocked to think today’s fashion offers them liberation, and see the veil as a way of guaranteeing that instead of being treated as “sex objects” their voice is heard objectively.

Almost one-in-ten people living in the world today are Muslim women. In your discussion, try to imagine how women from Muslim societies think about the way women are represented in our societies.

### CONVERSATION

**READ** Matthew 15: 21-28,  
Mark 7: 24-30

### PRAY

**WATCH** Watch DVD  
Chapters 4, 7

### TALK

- Do you have Muslim neighbours, friends, or colleagues at school or work? Apart from their beliefs, do you know how they feel about the present problems in the world? Do you know about their origins, where they come from, or about their culture and background?

- How would you respond to Muslim missionaries on your doorstep? Or to a member of your family marrying a Muslim?
- What do you think of the way women are used in advertising, or how the roles of women are defined by current trends? Do you think that Muslim's could find this portrayal of women offensive?
- How should schools respond to girls who want to wear the veil and traditional Muslim dress in schools? How would you feel if your daughter was asked not attend school if she was wearing a cross?
- How can we explore the area of woman within Islam more fully? Indeed, should we?

### CONTEMPLATION

The Muslim community in Ireland has a beautiful variety and diversity that reflects the many backgrounds of Muslims living here, north and south. There are Sunni and Shia communities, with different traditions about spirituality and worship, each with their own leadership and with beautiful mosque or houses of worship. It would be wrong to think that all Christians hold only one set of beliefs and only interpret them in one way, or that we have only one way of worshipping and praying. When we talk about Muslims we need to remember that like Christians they too have a variety of backgrounds, traditions and teachings. We can only learn that by talking with them rather than talking about them.

The woman in our Gospel readings probably found as she tried to push her way into the company of Jesus, that the people around her were pushing her

back not only because of her gender and religion, but because of her ethnic background. Religion and ethnicity often become confused. Think of how the words Arab and Muslim are often interchanged.



Think of the ways you can challenge discrimination, watch out for ways you find yourself identifying with some of the things that are being said by the Muslims and Christians who speak out, and ask how as Christians and Muslims, together, we can offer hope for the next generation.