

Message delivered at Kuki Worship Service, Pune, June 29, 2014  
Message: **Rev Dr J Lamboi Haokip** Text: Matthew 15:21-28 [the faith  
of Canaanite woman]

When I first arrived in the UK in the year 2006 and attended a church worship service there, I was asked to sit on the front row before the pulpit. Soon I discovered that the names of those who fought during the World Wars were written on the pulpit, and that disturbed me. I asked myself, “Why remember those people EVEN IN THE CHURCH?” The reason being that it was the colonial administration which suppressed my people during the so-called ‘1917-1919 Kuki Punitive Measures’ for refusing to fight for them in France. To a great extent, the present identity crisis of the people has to do with that episode. Secondly, and for me a more disturbing reason, was the fact that those soldiers were accepted and remembered in the church as part of her service for the Lord. In other words, what the colonial administration did was indirectly or unknowingly approved by the church. I understand that those reading the story through the lenses of Just War Theory may find no problem with it but I, as both a victim of the colonial brutality and a Christian convert, struggled to find a place in such a situation. I felt excluded. May be I was wrong but that was how I felt on that day. I suppose my problem was not the issue of Just War Theory as such but rather, the brutality committed to the people and its lasting and painful impact that the voiceless people have to suffer in the name of Just War Theory was what made me feel in that way.

The selected text for today’s meditation is about the inclusion of the excluded in Christian worship. It is about the persistent faith of a Canaanite woman in the person Jesus and the healing of her daughter by that faith.

The fascinating incident took place in the district of Trye and Sidon. Vs. 21 reads ‘Jesus left the place and went away to the district Tyre and Sidon. The ‘place’ here refers to ‘Gennesaret’ in Ch 14:34, Jesus’ first station on land after his journey on the water (vs 22-33), and beside the lake of Galilee surrounded by hills. From there (vs 21) Jesus went to the district of Trye and Sidon which are on the extreme north of Judea, by the Mediterranean Sea, where the Canaanite woman came to Jesus for help.

The excluded Canaanite woman and her persistent faith. Vs 22.

The Canaanite woman was not a member of the Jewish community - she was a pagan, an enemy, a woman and therefore, she was an excluded

person. Deuteronomy 20:17 reads [NIV] ‘Completely destroy them--the Hittites, Amorites, Canaanites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites--as the Lord your God has commanded you.’ The Jews did not have any relationship with other communities, including the Samaritans, who shared some of their bloods as a mixed race.

Despite the stiff social barriers, the Canaanite woman came to put her whole hearted faith in Jesus. The use of words like ‘shouting,’ ‘have mercy on me’, ‘Lord’, ‘Son of David’ in Vs 22 not only shows her whole hearted faith in the person ‘Jesus’ but also her awareness of the coming Messiah whom the Jews had been waiting for. It was a profound statement of faith in God.

The persistence of her faith is evident in her repeated requests - Vs 25 ‘She came and knelt down saying Lord help me,’ Vs 27 and ‘Yes Lord, even dogs eat the crumbs fallen from the master’s table.’ The intensity of her persistence is clearly reflected in the barriers that she had to overcome: At first, Jesus did not answer her request at all (Vs 23). When the disciples urged Jesus to send her away (Vs 23), Jesus said ‘I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel (Vs24). Jesus spoke again and said, It is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs (Vs 26) [Jesus might have done this in order to show Who He is, eg Lazarus’ case]. These verses show the struggle that the excluded woman had to overcome in order to come to God.”

The inclusion of the excluded, Vs 28

Having seen her faith, Jesus said ‘Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish. Then her daughter was healed instantly.’ The emphasis here is the faith of the woman. Jesus said, ‘great is your faith’ referring to the correctness and firmness of her faith in God alone. A similar situation is seen in Matthew 8: 5-13 wherein the faith of a Centurion led to the healing of his servant.

This is to say that Jesus accepts the excluded Canaanite woman and others who are not part of the Jews community when they come to him. In other words, it is possible for all human beings to come into the fold of God’s kingdom. This is clearly evident in the life-experience of Peter in Acts 10:11-16. There, Peter saw a vision where God told him not to call anything or any person unclean because God has already cleansed them (Vs 15).

The Inclusion of the Excluded and KWS

What can we possibly learn from this reflection as a community?

First, we must know that we were also once the excluded community but by God's grace we have now become part of a global Christian community. The first missionary to Manipur, William Pettigrew, failed to give equal importance to all the communities in the state. While he concentrated his work among a particular community in the Northern part of the state, the we remained unreached with the Gospel of Christ and as the result we were late comers to Christ and to the positive impacts of missionary activities such as education, medical care and so forth. Seeing such a helpless situation as ours, Watkin Roberts brought the message of Christ and started his independent mission called the Thadou-Kuki Pioneer Mission - better known as 'Kuki Mission 1910' - to include all the Kuki communities and non-Kukis alike both in India, Burma and Bangladesh. Although there were some converts prior to the Kuki Mission in 1910 through Pettigrew's work, there were no official mission bearing our own name 'Kuki Mission' and hence it is our God-given treasure to be cherished. This is our starting point, our foundation and inspiration for our existence as a community and ministry.

Second, we must make sure that we don't leave the One [Jesus] whom we have begun to follow about a hundred years ago. We are here only because of Christ and not for any other reason or purpose. KWS emerges as a worshipping community because of God. There may be different reasons why we come to KWS - to meet and have fellowship with each other, love for our community Kuki, love for our organization, KWS, etc - but these are all secondary. In fact, these will disappear like a mist unless we root ourselves to the Anchor, that is, Christ. Also, the identity 'Kuki' is a social construct like all other identities in the world and this will not last for eternity. But the ministry of KWS will survive through any challenges of times when we build our foundation in Christ who is eternal. The name, Kuki, KWS and so forth are only instruments that help us come together, to build each other up and to glorify God in and through a community. The only reason for our existence as individuals and a church is CHRIST. Hence, Stuart Townend's song 'In Christ Alone' becomes very inspiring to us as a community.

Third, we must know that our Master creates no boundaries. He is a 'border-crossing master' and if we want to follow him we need to break down the walls that we have constructed. These walls can be tribe, clan, denomination, colour, wealth, ideology, doctrine and so forth. We must not allow these walls to obstruct others from finding God in our midst.

We must create room for others. God led the people of Israel through the cloud in the sky. That cloud provides a shadow but not walls or fencing. KWS emerged like that cloud, guiding our people during such a time when we underwent the darkest period in our history. This organization must not become a stumbling block for others to find Christ who is actively working in our midst. Even in the process of searching for identity and liberation, the Kuki people must take care that they don't fall into the sin of uncritical linking between 'Christianity' and their ethno-political ideology which includes armed struggles. Such uncritical collaboration between church and state make others feel excluded, as we have seen in the beginning. The Kuki people don't have to repeat what others have done in the past. Rather, we should be missional in our worship and practice, because, the border-crossing Christ cannot be tamed and confined within our boundaries. My prayer is that one day we will become a worshipping community without walls so that those outside of our community can also see Christ who is doing wonders in our midst.

Finally, we must remain humble and open to God's continued leading and awaiting surprises. We are saved by His grace and we have nothing to boast about. The good news of Christ and for that matter our worship service 'KWS' is not our property that we can control. It is the gift of God to be shared with others. Following Christ demands a total submission to His rule, and readiness to participate in His Kingdom. We exist for others!

God is a God of compassion. He saw the condition of Israel in Egypt and came down to them sending Moses as a deliverer (Exo 3). God also sees the condition of Israel later when they fall into sin and idolatry and sends them prophets to declare their condition and call them back to God. God sees the need of Cornelius and He has heard his prayer and send Peter (Acts 10:31). God has compassion for all and works for their wholeness or peace (Acts 10:34-36). In our case, God sees our condition and sends us His messenger, Watkin Roberts in 1910 to bring the message of Christ. The Kingdom of God welcome and accepts ALL.

So we ask, 'Should the Kuki Worship Service have walls at all?'