

Mark 7:24-30 Jesus and the Syro-phoenician Woman

This morning I would like us to see what we can learn from the meeting of Jesus with the woman whose daughter had an 'unclean spirit', what might now be called epilepsy or a mental health issue. The story comes around every three years so most of us have heard it before, but without studying it more closely we will not get the full meaning and significance of the meeting. I certainly have learnt more than I knew before, since going to St Marks library last week and reading what the scholars have to say about it. There seems to be agreement about the words that were spoken, but much less agreement about the tone of Jesus' words, which on the surface are very harsh and not at all loving.

Before we read again what Jesus said, let us remind ourselves of where this story is in St Mark's gospel which is quite different to the other three gospels in that it has Jesus teaching, healing and exorcising 'unclean spirits' right from the first chapter. There are no genealogies, or nativity stories in Mark.

In chapter 1 Jesus exorcises an 'unclean' spirit from a man in the synagogue (23), and there is a very tender exchange between Jesus and a leper, *A leper came to him begging him, and kneeling he said to him, "If you choose you can make me clean." Moved with pity, Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him, and said to him, "I do choose. Be made clean!" Immediately the leprosy left him, and he was made clean. (40)*

This morning we are up to Chapter 7, about half way through the gospel and very close to the final chapters leading to Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection. Jesus has gone into gentile territory near Tyre a gentile city known for its paganism and unbridled wealth. He has sought seclusion in a house when a non-Jewish woman comes into the house and begs him to heal her daughter of an unclean spirit. What does he say to her?

"Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs."(27)

There is general agreement about what these words really mean: the children refers to the Jewish people, the food are the blessings and love of the God of Israel, and the dogs refer to people like her. She was a gentile and the Jews often referred to gentiles in a derogatory way as dogs. The gentiles had derogatory terms for the Jews as well! Even so his response is very sharp, even harsh. It is

not a caring Jesus full of pity like he was for the leper. The text then says 'But', that is, the woman did not give up, she was put down, but she did not give up. *But she answered him, "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs."*(28) and it is her quick response to his words which makes Jesus decide to extend healing to the child.

Then he said to her, "For saying that, you may go – the demon has left your daughter." So she went home, found the child lying on the bed, and the demon gone.(29-30) That's it. On a first reading that's all we get!

But once we begin to explore more deeply why this story was kept in Mark and in Matthew, we begin to find possible answers beyond a woman getting Jesus to respond to her cry for help because of her quick wit and refusal to be put down. To find out more we must find out what scholars and theologians over the centuries have had to say about it.

Remembering that there is agreement about the content of the meeting, let us see what we can find to more fully understand Jesus' possible reasons for speaking as he did. The first words are revealing, *From there he set out and went away to the region of Tyre. He entered a house and did not want anyone to know he was there. Yet he could not escape notice...*(24)

Jesus had moved out of Jewish territory. He was in the land of the gentiles, he was hiding in someone's house. He wants to remain anonymous – we are not told why, but I like the suggestion that he had gone somewhere to get away from the crowds who were wanting his teaching and his healing, and the pharisees and scribes who had been challenging him about his disregard of food laws and other teachings of the Torah, and his disciples who never seemed to understand what he was getting at when he spoke in parables. He wanted a break from all this. He wanted to be alone. He had probably been 'on the road' for two years.

He was tired!

But no sooner had he got there than this woman, who was not even a Jew, was knocking on the door. Now she was deferential, she did bow down and begged for his help and called him Sir or Lord. The scholars suggest that she was probably a wealthy woman, because she was able to move around on her own, and she had enough confidence to respond to his words with her own play on his words. It is also relevant that when she got home she found her child lying on the bed. Had she been poor her child would have slept on a mat.

I also learnt that while the Jews certainly regarded dogs as unclean and as mangy, dirty scavengers, which they were, unlike the Jews the Gentiles had small dogs as house pets. They did eat the scraps which fell from the table as people were eating. That leads us to another aspect of her response to Jesus saying that his mission was to the Jewish people 'first' – she challenges him by pointing out that the dogs eat the food at the same time as the people are eating because while people used bread to gather up food, they also used bread to wipe their hands. When their hands were clean they threw the bread under the table for the dogs. What she is saying is please don't make me wait any longer. Help me now.

Finally, when we remember that St Mark's gospel was probably written about 70AD, or to be politically correct we now say 70 CE, the Common Era, what the early Christian church would take from this healing story is support for their practice of welcoming into their communities anyone who professed that Jesus was the son of God and saviour of the world. After persecuting the first Christians and his Damascus experience, St Paul called himself the apostle to the Gentiles. He insisted that salvation and God's grace was available to all people.

So what can we learn from today's gospel?

First, we must not give up when we get put down. We may not have a quick reply to words that hurt, but we must get up and don't give up until we find a way to get what we are searching for.

Secondly, we must always be open to the possibility that our mission in life, our reason for being, is greater than what we first thought. We should always remain open to doing and being more than we ever expected to be.

The writer of our second hymn (444), John Newton (1725 - 1807), is a wonderful example of this truth. He went to sea at a very young age and became involved in the slave trade, rising to the position of captain of slave ships. In 1748 a decisive moment came when the ship he was on encountered a severe storm and almost sank. As the ship filled with water he called out to God. The cargo shifted and stopped up the hole, and the ship drifted to safety. Even though Newton continued in the slave trade for a time, he marked this experience as the beginning of his conversion to evangelical Christianity. He began to prepare for ministry and eventually became a priest in the Church of England in 1764. It's an amazing story about an amazing man who wrote the hymn, *Amazing Grace*.

Finally, we should all of us go to St Mark's library to learn more about our Christian faith. I've said this before, but I want to say it again because it is so important. Our parish has paid an annual subscription which gives all of us free lending rights. The librarians are extremely helpful, and we can make ourselves a free cup of coffee or tea in the tea room. My experience is that if you and I dare to learn more about our Christian faith and practice over the centuries, I can assure you that you will find yourself in uncharted waters as you seek to discern what you keep, what you set aside, and what you learn for the first time about the religious faith you profess to believe in. It becomes a quest for truth and understanding about the spiritual and creative reality which pervades our universe. It is a quest worthy of our best endeavours.