

Sunday 9th September 2018 No place for partiality
Isaiah 35:4-7 Psalm 146 James 2:1-10 Mark 7:24-37

Intro

I wonder which, of all the verses we have heard this morning, are the ones that struck you the most, that jumped out at you.

I think that a few of the verses from Mark's gospel are some of the most unusual and unexpected in all of the gospels.

Mark 7:27-29

*She (the mother of a little girl) begged him (Jesus) to cast the demon out of her daughter. **27** He said 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.'* **28** *But she answered him, 'Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs.'* **29** *Then he said to her, 'For saying that, you may go—the demon has left your daughter.'*

We are going to study what these verses may mean, have a brief look at the rest of the passage from Mark involving the healing of the deaf man, and then consider what relevance these lessons may have for us today.

So...

Jesus has taken himself off to the coastal city of Tyre, further north up the Mediterranean coast from Israel. It was a wealthy, flourishing city that historically did not have a good relationship with Israel.

At the time of Jesus the Jews living in Tyre experienced economic hardship due to the exploits of the Gentile landowners of the area

Jesus had travelled there, we are not sure why, and was trying to stay under the radar, he did not want anyone to know he was there. But he could not keep his presence a secret and as soon as word got out a Syrophenician woman came and found him and begged him to heal her young daughter.

It is easy for us to miss the significance of these words. This was 2000 years ago. NO self respecting, honourable Jewish woman would dare to invite herself into the presence of a Jewish man, never mind a Greek, Gentile woman. It was NOT the done thing. She had no 'right' to engage Jesus in conversation.

I was trying to think of a modern day equivalent. I guess it could be seen as similar to the story that was in the news a few years ago when a man tried to break into the Queens rooms at Buckingham Palace. It was just not acceptable.

But see why she had done this...

Her young daughter was possessed by a demon and the woman was desperate enough to go and beg Jesus to heal her daughter. She was driven by fear for her daughters life and at that point she would do anything, break ALL social etiquette, in order to save her daughter from the torment she suffered.

Usually when we read of someone coming to ask Jesus for healing, either for themselves or for someone else, Jesus responds with love and compassion. Here he responds with words that are shocking to hear.

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

When Jesus says children he is referring to the children of Israel - the Jewish people
He is giving priority to them

When he says dogs it could be that he is using the Jewish slang word for pagans or Gentiles. He could be inferring someone of an impure mind.

Whichever, he replies to the woman's request for her daughters healing by saying - you'll have to wait, it is not your turn, healing is first and foremost for my chosen people, the Jewish nation !! A difficult and unexpected reply. Not one that we would expect to hear.

Why did Jesus respond like this? Some commentaries I read suggested that He was testing her to see how real her faith was, that He was drawing her out to see what was really in her heart. Another argument was that her persistence and faith pushed Him in to reaching out to the non Jewish community.

Whatever His reason for responding to her in this way, I wonder how we might have reacted if we were that woman? How would we expect her to react?

To creep away, embarrassed and ashamed? To want the ground to swallow her up?

But she answers boldly and almost as cryptically as Jesus. And very respectfully, accepting the priority of the Jewish people but calling Jesus into mission with the Gentile people.

'Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs.'

The word she uses for Sir is 'kurios' which could also be translated as Lord or even Yahweh

She replies with the same language as Jesus, accepts his challenge of prioritising the Jewish people but is not satisfied and calls for mission and healing to the Gentile people.

She may be seen as unworthy to share in the Kingdom according to the culture of her day but she is desperate for all that Jesus is offering.

The crowd in our reading from 2 weeks ago walked away from Jesus when He declared He was the bread of life but this woman was prepared to grovel on the floor for it!

And so, although at a physical distance from the small girl, Jesus proclaims her healing, and the Gentile woman goes home and finds her daughter set free.

In true Mark style the story then swiftly moves on to another situation, another healing.

This time in the region of the Decapolis - one of 4 regions where there were people of mixed race, and an area that had been home to Queen Jezebel (Baal worshippers that we heard about in 1 Kings 16)

This time a deaf man is brought to Jesus and again the people begged Jesus to heal the man. At the time of Jesus physical impairments were often viewed as a consequence of sin and the people had no status in society.

This time Jesus takes the man aside, puts his fingers into the mans ears and then uses His spit on his tongue.

Interestingly I learned this week that in Jewish culture the saliva of a firstborn son was considered to have the power to heal infirmities.

Jesus looks to heaven and then declares 'Be Opened' and the mans ears were opened and his tongue released. Once the man could speak clearly Jesus ordered them NOT to speak of what had happened. How impossible that was for the man. He could now speak and he and his friends zealously proclaimed all that had happened.

Both the Syrophenician woman and her daughter and the deaf, mute man, for different reasons, were excluded and on the edge of society according to humanly contrived prejudices.

By speaking to and physically healing both these people, it meant that they were also restored to their communities. These were not just healing of bodies but also of human relationships.

Jesus had been amazed at the lack of faith of those in his home town, a Jewish community (Mark 6:5) and he could not perform miracles there because of their lack of faith.

But here, in 2 different Gentile communities He finds people of such faith that they beg Him to heal those who are marginalised and alienated and excluded from their communities.

Why do some people become excluded?

It is often due to our human insecurities that we differentiate amongst people and value some more than others, why we discriminate against them... for their weaknesses or because we see them as at fault

Look at the reading from James. Here the differentiation, the favouritism James teaches against is to do with wealth. James talks of the rich person with gold rings and fine clothes and the poor person in dirty clothes and how differently they would be treated.

In the reading from Mark it is to do with race and physical disability.

As humans, as communities, we differentiate, we segregate and discriminate for so many reasons

wealth / infirmity / family status / nationality / culture / mental health / gender / religion

the list goes on homelessness / addiction / appearance

Who are those we push to the margins of our society? Who are the marginalised? Who we become prejudiced against?

To be able to function, even on a practical level in Britain today, to do something as necessary as open a bank account, you need forms of ID that have a photo and an address and what's more an address for the last 5 years. What if you have been homeless or on a very low income. You may well not have a driving licence, you more than likely won't have a passport, if homeless you won't have utility bills. So no acceptable forms of ID. So no bank account and so the cycle continues. How do refugees manage?

What if you are elderly and no access to internet and an email address... this excludes you from so much in today's culture

What if you are a young man, with a dark, olive coloured skin, dark haired with a beard? Being in the wrong part of the city at the wrong time and all sorts of assumptions could be made against you. That could seriously affect your life.

Last week we heard from Georgie about the widows and orphans in Kenya who become excluded from their communities for physical and financial reasons.

Who are those that get pushed to the margins of our communities and are discriminated against?

These 2 stories of healing - of the Syrophenician woman and the deaf man - were radical in their day. They may not seem so to us today but they were unprecedented in Jesus' time. And they taught of the inclusive love of God to all peoples. None were or are to be excluded. The gospel message was and still is for all.

James reminds us that we are to love our neighbour as ourself. We are not to show favouritism to some and discriminate against others. This goes against Godly living. All are in need of fellowship with God and within community.

A New Testament scholar Mitzi Minor wrote this

'a worthless, Gentile girl whose mind was devoured by a demon and a good for nothing deaf man who couldn't even speak clearly were indeed children of God to be embraced and valued. Humanity's authentic response to God's initiative calls forth recognition that there are NO external barriers between God and any human being: not race, class, ethnicity, gender, age or physical condition

Status is a product of human invention invisible to God because to Him all are equally valuable'

James reminded his readers of the Old Testament Law that Jesus re-iterated many times over 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself.' Our neighbour includes all those we come in to contact with. How do we as a community, as a church and as individuals show God's love to them so that they may be restored into human relationships?

May we all be open to God's love and guiding that we may be used in His healing and restoration of people's lives.

Amen