

**Mark 7:24-30**

James 2:1-17

Whenever I visit places with which I had previously been unfamiliar – whether in this country or abroad – I do like to spend time to get to know the locals, and to get to understand something of their culture. It seems a shame that in some popular holiday destinations we've tended to create our own British enclaves – where you can get fish & chips, full English breakfast, and copies of the Sun and Mirror - such that folk get little, if any, exposure to the *local* people and culture. But the thing is, when we actually take the time to cross those cultural boundaries and try to get to know *local* folk, who might indeed be very different from ourselves, it's amazing how often we can be pleasantly surprised by what we find.

And so it was when the Lord Jesus left his own familiar territory and travelled into a region which was very different from what he was used to. In going away to the region of Tyre, Jesus was moving out of wholly *Jewish* territory - it was an area where

he was likely to encounter people who were very different from his own people - people who held very different religious beliefs from that of the Jews, and who were of quite a different culture. It was not the natural place for the Jewish Messiah to be found. But whatever his reason for being there, his visit results in a rather surprising encounter.

Because as he goes around that area, he's accosted by a local woman whose little daughter has an unclean spirit. She's not one of Jesus' own people, but a foreigner - a woman of Syrophenician birth. Now this is very significant, because in terms of her religion, this woman was basically a pagan - a worshipper of many different gods. Unlike the Jews, she didn't worship the one true living God. And yet it is this pagan woman who really believes that Jesus has the power to heal her daughter - she puts her faith in him. In fact, in coming to Jesus, she breaks all the rules in terms of Jewish religious practices - not least in regard to the fact that strict Jews believed that any contact with Gentiles (non-Jews) could make them ritually unclean. Besides which, a Jewish

rabbi would not normally be seen talking with a woman, let alone a pagan woman.

So, the Lord's initial response to the woman is understandable. He points out to her that his commitment and his calling is first and foremost to his *own* people - to the Jews, God's chosen people - and so he uses a proverb to make his point - "Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." It's a saying which could, in some way, reflect the tensions between Israel and Tyre at the time over the fact that much of the agricultural produce of Galilee was ending up in Tyre, much to the annoyance of the Jews. So, what the Lord might basically be saying here is, 'You Tyrians literally take the food from the mouths of the ordinary Jews to whom God has sent me. What right have you to take their spiritual food too?' And the term 'dogs' was often used by Jews to refer to Gentiles, though this does not mean that Jesus recognized this description as in any sense accurate. He may simply have wanted to see whether the woman was willing to take such a lowly

position, in order to gain healing of her daughter. All the same, the response the woman received was not particularly encouraging, though at the same time, it was not entirely dismissive. Yet the woman wasn't willing to leave things there. She might be a woman and a Gentile, but she has a child in need. And so she adds a bit more to Jesus' image of the children being fed - "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." What she's saying here is that it doesn't need to be a straight choice between Jew and Gentile. Nor does Jesus doing something for her daughter necessarily distract him from the primary focus of his mission (the people of Israel). And so, in response to her persistence and her *faith*, the Lord does indeed heal the woman's daughter. The woman gladly accepted the humble position as an 'outsider', and she discovered that even the total 'outsider' can share in God's abundant grace and mercy.

So, first of all, it's important to note the huge significance of Christ's response in this situation. Because this particular encounter points to what would ultimately be the scope of Christ's ministry. It

signals the eventual opening up of the Kingdom of God to *all* who put their trust in Jesus – Jew and Gentile alike. Jesus' mission during the course of his *earthly* ministry was primarily to the people of Israel, God's chosen people, and the Syrophenician woman here would have understood that. But, *after* Christ's Crucifixion, Resurrection and Ascension, it would be a completely different matter, as *all* who accepted Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour would be brought into the family of God's people; the dividing wall between Jew and Gentile would be broken down, and all would be *one* in *Christ*. In fact, the promise made to Abraham back in Genesis, that his descendants, the people of Israel, would be a blessing to all nations, finds its ultimate fulfillment in the greatest of the sons of Israel, the Messiah Jesus.

So, God's offer of salvation through Jesus Christ is now for *all* people, irrespective of their background - that's why *we're* here today. We can choose to accept or reject that offer, but it nonetheless remains open to *all* people. All too often I come across people who say to me that they feel that they're

simply not good enough to be a Christian. Well, the point is, *none* of us are good enough - and that's precisely why we need that salvation from sin which Christ offers us through his death on the Cross. And that offer is open to you and to me - to *all* people.

Secondly, I believe we're being reminded here that true faith can often be seen in people we least expect it. The Syrophenician woman was a foreigner, a pagan - not a good monotheistic Jew. And yet she still demonstrates real faith in Jesus – and the Lord is clearly impressed by this. Faith being seen in the unlikeliest of people. And yet how often *we* can fail to see where *real* faith lies, especially when we merely look at people on the surface.

In our reading from the Letter of James, the author makes reference to a particular phenomenon which seems to have arisen in the early Church in which distinctions were being made between rich and poor believers. Wealthy Christians were being given the places of honour in church – the front seats, while the poorer folk were told to sit in more inferior

places. The impression being given was that the richer folk were somehow the *real* people of faith, while the poorer people were not such good Christians. It's sadly something which has continued down the centuries – not least in the predominantly middle-class Church of England, where there has so often been a marked tendency to show favouritism to those who have wealth and status in wider society; the old idea of 'reserved pews' where the more well-heeled parishioners could pay for the 'nicer' seats in church, while the peasant folk sat in the more inferior positions, perhaps epitomises this. But James points out very clearly - "Has not God chosen the *poor* in the world to be *rich in faith....*" Real faith is not necessarily where we might at first expect it. I'm sure that those of us who have visited poorer countries and have encountered Christians there have been impressed by the sincerity and depth of their faith - a faith which is often so much richer than our own. And even here, in our *own* context, I'm sure we've encountered folk who might not be held in high esteem by wider society, but who are nevertheless people of great faith. When we

merely judge people by their *outward* appearances, we can so easily miss the *real* people of faith - people who have a deep commitment to, and love for, the Lord – folk who can indeed be a great inspiration to *us* in our *own* walk of discipleship.

And thirdly, we're reminded here that we're called to cross national, religious and other boundaries to help those in need. Naturally, when the Lord encountered the Syrophenician woman, he was initially concerned about his mission priorities - that the primary focus of his ministry, initially, was his own people - the people of Israel. But in the end, this did not stop him from crossing the many barriers in his way - barriers of nationality, religion, gender and tradition - to help this foreign woman who was in need. And so the Church itself must be committed to breaking down the barriers that prolong human need or prevent the needy from being helped. Once again, in our reading from the Letter of James, the author declares - "You do well if you really fulfil the royal law according to the scripture, 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself'." And that neighbour we are

called to love may not necessarily be of a similar background to ourselves at all. It's an approach which is followed by various Christian mission partners and agencies at home and abroad (like the Church Mission Society and Mission Aviation Fellowship), and other aid organizations (like Tearfund and Samaritan's Purse). We don't necessarily have to agree with another person's beliefs or outlook on life in order to help that person in need - it's simply about showing the love of Christ to another human being. And doing so demonstrates to others that our faith truly *is* alive.

So, as we come to partake of Holy Communion this morning, we come as people from very different backgrounds, but Christ invites us *all* to share in his feast. As the words of a modern Communion hymn put it:

As Christ breaks bread and bids us share,  
Each proud division ends;  
The love that made us makes us one,  
And strangers now are friends.

Let us pray:

Heavenly Father, we thank you for the salvation which you offer us and all people through the death and resurrection of your Son. We so often judge others according to appearances, so we ask that you would grow in us a deep and impartial love for the people you have placed in our lives. And may we seek to cross those boundaries which divide in order to reach out to our neighbours in need, both near and far away. In Jesus' name. Amen.