

Outcasts Included

Mark 7:24-34

1. Introduction

Sometimes church people can get it all wrong. In 1782 a new minister was appointed to Holy Trinity Cambridge, but because he was not their first choice the churchwardens locked the pews and stayed away in protest. When he placed alternative seats at his own expense for the poor of the town, these church people threw them out into the courtyard. It took Charles Simeon many years of persistent loving service to create a church for gown and town, for academic and non-academic alike. Well-meaning church people can get it all wrong and not understand that the good news of Jesus is for everyone! This is the context of today's gospel reading. The

loyal and eager church people of Jesus' day got it all wrong. Many were more concerned with their own traditions than with the word of God. They were more concerned with avoiding outward pollution than inner cleansing. They were more concerned with finding fault with Jesus than perceiving his true identity. It is a pagan woman who displays the right way to approach God. It is a pagan woman who displays the nature of the Kingdom of God.

This incident takes place outside the borders of Israel in the coastal areas 50-80 kilometres north-west of Galilee. This healing is unique in its location being one of the few stories of healings by Jesus outside the physical boundaries of Israel, but it is remarkable for at least three other reasons.

2. It involves a pagan foreign woman

Jesus relates to a pagan foreign woman. In terms of the previous story related by Mark she is unclean on a number of counts –

In the first place she was unclean because of her gender. Contemporary Jewish views about women could be very strict. An old Jewish maxim said: *do not speak much with a woman* (and a later addition applied it to one's own wife!). Rules forbade men to be

alone with a woman, to look at a married woman or even give a greeting. It was disgraceful for a scholar to speak with a woman in the street. Moreover in the temple a Jewish woman was allowed access only as far as the Court of the Women. Her religious obligations were on the same level as a slave. In fact Josephus, the Jewish historian said *a woman is in every respect of less worth than a man*. Yet Jesus was different. Every woman in this Cathedral

This morning should be profoundly grateful that he was so different, even if church culture has sometimes been slow to catch up with its revolutionary Lord.

In the second place, she is a Gentile by birth and culture. In fact she is a Greek speaking pagan, a religious descendent of the enemies of the Old Testament people of God. Her ancestors had engaged in polytheistic idolatry and had crude natural mythologies centring on fertility cults. Guilt is often unfortunately by association.

Any true blue Pharisee would have avoided her like the plague. She was taboo. She was worse than all the publicans; prostitutes and tax collectors bundled together. At least they had nationality and language in their favour!

But Jesus sees her as a person in need regardless of her gender, ethnic or religious background. She falls at Jesus' feet and kept begging him to help in her family crisis. Her daughter is wickedly or cruelly demon possessed. What this means is not described, but it probably involved massive personality distortion and uncontrollable destructive convulsions. Jesus recognises the plea for mercy. In

fact this is an understatement, because the text in Matthew's account suggests she kept on desperately shouting in an agitated and excited manner. He responds to this pagan foreign woman in her hour of need.

3. It involves a strange response from Jesus

It is a strange response because he offers nothing and when he speaks it borders almost on the level of insult –

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.'

In the first place, notice he points out to this needy woman the historical priority of his God given mission to the Jewish people who are referred to in this text as *children*. Her request was premature.

The Jews must receive his help first. They must have the first opportunity to receive him, because in the mystery of God's will, they were chosen first. That is why his whole earthly ministry apart from one or two incidents is given to Israel (Romans 15:8). This was God's plan.

In the second place, he also seems insensitively rude (26). If the *children* are the people of Israel, then the *dogs* are the Gentiles. The essential background to this is that 'dogs' was a favourite Jewish expression for the heathen (just like I must confess that 'wog' was the commonly used word of my childhood for migrants!).

Dogs however in the Ancient World were less often household pets or companions and more likely to be dirty scavengers amongst the garbage of the streets. To strict Jewish people dogs stood for everything unclean (cf. Philippians 3:2, Revelation 22:15). The word 'dog' was a word of reproach. Jesus seems to be suggesting the Jews must be fed. It was not right to curtail his mission for the sake of someone who was not true blue by birth, race or religion (i.e. a dog).

Of course it is not an insult. It would go against everything we know of Jesus for this to be so. In fact Jesus does not use the usual word for 'dog'. He uses the diminutive, the word for 'puppies', the affectionate term for a household pet. Of course we also do not

know the tone of his voice or his facial expression (e.g. we can call a person an 'old rascal' with a voice of contempt or a voice of affection with a smile on the face and a twinkle in the eye). What Jesus is doing is plain. He is establishing a

priority, but he is also leaving the door open for a response of faith free of superstition. He is testing her faith. He is proving its reality. He is checking its persistence.

4. It is involves her exemplary faith

She is a marvellous example of humility and persistent confident faith in the ability of Jesus to meet her need even though she does not deserve anything from him. She has probably only heard second or third hand reports about Jesus from those who had witnessed aspects of his ministry. She has perhaps heard bush telegraph hints that Jesus is the Jewish Messiah. But her need is desperate. She is insistent. In humility she kneels before him, and throws herself entirely upon his mercy. Furthermore she is not

deterred or deflected by the apparent obstacle of Jesus' mission to the Jews first. She is not presuming on her position. She has a confidence in Jesus which refuses to be repulsed. She knows she has no rights to covenant mercies, to favoured status. She does not argue to rights and wrongs of divine election. As quick as a flash she responds with the words full of wit, wisdom and faith –

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

That is, the dogs feed at the same time. They don't have to wait. They eat the crumbs while the children are eating. It could be she had a dog like my grandfather's, who was affectionately nicknamed 'Hoover' or it could be more probably a reference to Eastern customs where in the absence of table napkins one wiped one's fingers on a hunk of bread then dropped it on the floor for the pets!

She is in effect saying let the children indeed be fed (let the Jews be first), but let me have a superfluous crumb. Even though she may not sit down as yet at Messiah's table as a guest, surely she may be allowed to receive a crumb of the uncovenanted mercies of God. In short she appeals unconditionally to the kindness and mercy of God in Jesus. This is irresistible and irrepressible faith in

the person of Jesus. She does not demand a sign or words of healing but simply asks for help for her daughter. Here is a persevering, persisting, confident but non-demanding faith in Jesus, and the power of his grace. Moreover her confidence in Jesus is rewarded with her daughter healed immediately and from a distance.

5. Conclusion

Sometimes church people regrettably get it all wrong. We can misunderstand Jesus and His gospel. The 'church people' of Jesus' day thought their nationality, their traditions and their religious observances would guarantee their salvation, but this incident reminds us of the one thing which is necessary. We need to recognise who Jesus is and in faith ask him for mercy. Of course

we know much more about Jesus than this pagan woman. We have confessed him as our dying Saviour and risen Lord. We know that He alone can cleanse us from sin, deliver us from the tyranny of the Evil One and make us whole. We know there is no substitute for faith in the love and mercy of Jesus.

Outward things (such as nationality, language, customs and culture) are irrelevant, but without faith it is impossible to please God. In fact without faith in Jesus it is impossible to please God. It

is the humble, perceptive, persistent, confident faith of this unnamed woman which gladdens the heart of Jesus and is the right way for all of us to approach God. For us it might be in the words of the old hymn: 'Nothing in my hand I bring, simply to thy cross I cling'. Or it could be in the famous words of the tax collector in the parable of Jesus: 'Lord, have mercy on me the sinner'.

My friends, the faith that simply seeks mercy from Jesus is always honoured.

+ Trevor Edwards

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