

Bible Study

Sunday 9 Sept, Synod

Mark 7:24-37

Two stories of miraculous healing

A. The Syrophenician Woman's Faith

²⁴ 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,

Travelling in a region at the cultural intersections; always inhabiting the in-between places; tight, cracks; creative spaces where differences collide; where opportunities spawned for something surprising

²⁵ but a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit immediately heard about him, and she came and bowed down at his feet.

She's heard about him along the grapevine so to speak; not social media. But news that generates or gives people hope has a way of cutting through the rubbish and fake; she has a great need – her daughter – and prostrates herself before him; typical of those seeking healing and exorcism; a petitioner on behalf of another

²⁶ Now the woman was a Gentile, of Syrophenician origin. She begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter.

The woman, no name (the other, the despised, the unentitled) due to her religious and ethnic identity, an alien to Israel's life, a polytheist. You never know who will turn up in your life.

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."

Herein lies the difficulty the petitioner has to overcome. And frankly it seems insurmountable. Israel are children; they have a natural entitlement and priority compared to Gentiles who are dogs; not your house-trained variety but the wild scavenging dogs of the street. It's the 'd' word equivalent to the 'n' word. The most insulting and dishonouring of identifiers.

²⁸ But she answered him, “Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs.²⁹

The woman’s wit and self-abasement win the day. She turns the scavenging dogs of the streets into the domestic house dogs which have access to the table scraps. Slick move. And also humble. She is prepared to identify with the softer metaphor of ‘house dogs’. Her trust and hope in Jesus is so powerful that she is willing to divest herself of her being to secure her goal for her daughter.

Then he said to her, “For saying that, you may go—the demon has left your daughter.”

Literally ‘Go home’. Something momentous has happened. She obeys without seeing the result of what she sought. ‘Blessed are those who believe and do not see’.

³⁰ So she went home, found the child lying on the bed, and the demon gone.

The woman is on a quest. Her overwhelming trust in Jesus as healer and exorcist drives her. Yet she is an ambiguous figure. Like all Gentiles she is depicted as worthless, no better than a dog. I believe the President of the USA recently referred to one of his former staff in similar terms. On the other hand, her persistence, self-abasement and wit indicate a humility and faith that is presented as a model to be imitated.

Jesus appears in this miracle story as an ambiguous figure. His Jewishness with all that this entails about favouritism and privilege emerge. Yet something occurs; we are privy to a gospel moment – a radical breakthrough; cultural and ethnic barriers are broken down; mission evidently extends beyond the house of Israel. Jesus appears in this story as the reluctant yet radical transformer of Israel’s religion. It is tempting to smooth the jarring note of the encounter: Jesus was only testing her. We have to reckon with the possibility that this story is a breakthrough story in the life of Jesus; the mission of God suddenly got a lot bigger and more dangerous. I cannot help but think that the early church saw this story as a paradigm for the universal kingdom of God where all might eat of the bread from the table. Who is welcome at our tables?

B. Jesus Cures a Deaf Man 7: 27-34

This story has no parallel in Luke or Matthew. Commentators wonder whether they knew of the story but omitted it because it had too much of Jesus the worker of miracles through magic.

³¹ Then he returned from the region of Tyre, and went by way of Sidon towards the Sea of Galilee, in the region of the Decapolis.

³² They brought to him a deaf man who had an impediment in his speech; and they begged him to lay his hand on him.

It's a miracle that involves touch – the last sense to be lost as we age and die.

³³ He took him aside in private, away from the crowd, and put his fingers into his ears, and he spat and touched his tongue.

This miracle will take place in secret. In an age which makes much of show and fanfare and generates a culture of voyeurism here is a healing far from the madding crowd. The emphasis in this healing is on the actual therapeutic process. It is a medical problem. Fingers into the ears; he spat some saliva, touched the tongue with the saliva. In the ancient world saliva was regarded as having potent healing properties – beneficial for the treatment of venom poisoning, a deterrent to snakes, assist in mental anxiety, and superficial ailments. Jesus' saliva is healing because it he is endowed with divine power.

³⁴ Then looking up to heaven, he sighed and said to him, “Ephphatha,” that is, “Be opened.”

Jesus looks to heaven and sighs. Is this a prayer, an expression of compassion? Is it the prayer of our inmost hearts? We do not know to pray as we ought but the Spirit searches (and sighs) within to bring to voice the prayer of the Spirit within. Is this the manner in which healers draw down spiritual power? Then utters Ephphatha: 'Be opened'. He is speaking to the ear, the faculty of hearing. Yet the text quotes in both Greek and Aramaic. This indicates that for Gentile Greek speakers the actual Aramaic words have power.

³⁵ And immediately his ears were opened, his tongue was released, and he spoke plainly.

Literally the bond of the tongue was untied. Commentators wonder; had someone cast a spell to bind him i.e. hinder speech.

³⁶ Then Jesus ordered them to tell no one; but the more he ordered them, the more zealously they proclaimed it.

The command to silence fits with taking the person aside to heal, not to keep the identity of Jesus secret but a literary device – the command is only given to be broken! The intention is to impress the hearers of the mighty deeds that are so extraordinary they cannot be hidden. Jesus glory shines forth in spite of an injunction to conceal it.

³⁷ They were astounded beyond measure, saying, “He has done everything well; he even makes the deaf to hear and the mute to speak.”

He has done everything well. Not an acclamation such that we might expect, for example Son of God. But it echoes from Isaiah: Then will the eyes of the blind be opened, and the ears of the deaf hear And the tongue of the speech impaired will be clear (35:5-6). And even back to Genesis, everything was very good.

The conclusion of this story points to the great day of ransom the of Zion is dawning; the fulfilment of the prophecies of Jewish scripture has appeared. Jesus is the charismatic healer, even magician of a special kind. ‘He has done all things well’; nothing less than an acclamation of him as divine agent of future fulfilment.

Jesus is agent of God in the renewal of creation; the sense of hearing and voice are opened to give forth true praise and acknowledgement of the mercy of God.

The *Syrophoenician* woman’s faith points to a universal mission that includes both Israel and Gentile; entitlement is abolished; the table has been opened to all.

May the good God open our ears to hear, give us a voice to praise and a table to which all are welcome. For Christ’s sake we pray.

Amen