

²⁴ Jesus left that place and went to the vicinity of Tyre. He entered a house and did not want anyone to know it; yet he could not keep his presence secret. ²⁵ In fact, as soon as she heard about him, a woman whose little daughter was possessed by an impure spirit came and fell at his feet. ²⁶ The woman was a Greek, born in Syrian Phoenicia. She begged Jesus to drive the demon out of her daughter.

²⁷ 'First let the children eat all they want,' he told her, 'for it is not right to take the children's bread and toss it to the dogs.'

²⁸ 'Lord,' she replied, 'even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs.'

²⁹ Then he told her, 'For such a reply, you may go; the demon has left your daughter.'

³⁰ She went home and found her child lying on the bed, and the demon gone. (Mark 7:24-30 NIVUK)

Have you seen 'The Exorcist'? Don't worry, I'm not asking for a show of hands or a verbal response. By all accounts, it's a pretty scary movie, so I was quite surprised to discover recently that one well-known film critic rated it as his all-time favourite. I have to confess that other than an occasional clip on tv I've not seen it, but I've seen its effect.

It took some time for the film to make it to the picture house in the small town where I had my first teaching job, but after it did, I remember being approached by a small group of what we would now call year 10 students (they were 4th years in those days) who were obviously pretty perturbed. "Mr Hodges, do you think it's possible for someone to be demon possessed?"

They had been to see The Exorcist, exaggerating their ages in order to see an adult rated film. "Yes," I replied, "it's possible." They wanted to know how a person might avoid demon possession. I suggested that the only certain remedy was to be possessed by the Holy Spirit, and his presence is linked to putting your faith in Jesus Christ. They went away thoughtful. I'm not sure how far they got in their spiritual quests, but at least they all seemed determined not to lie about their ages the next time they went to the cinema.

1. Jesus and the Woman

a) The woman who comes to see Jesus in this passage in Mark 7, is concerned for her little daughter, who is described as being '*possessed by an impure (or evil/unclean) spirit.*' We are not told how this affected the little girl, although it's hard to imagine that she was prey to all the experiences that befell Regan in the film, but later, in chapter 9, Mark does tell us about a boy whose malaise is similarly described. He was robbed of speech. His father explained that, '*Whenever it (the unclean spirit) seizes him, it throws him to the ground. He foams at the mouth, gnashes his teeth and becomes rigid.*' (Mk 9:18). Clearly, however it was that the little girl was affected, it was a great concern to her mother, who came looking to Jesus for an answer.

b) Jesus had left Galilee where he had been pursued by the crowds, for what was supposed to be a time of retreat and teaching with his disciples, something that he had tried to do at least once before. On this occasion he moved to the area around the ancient port city of Tyre, northwest of Galilee towards the Mediterranean coast, and an area populated largely by Gentiles, people who were not Jews. The trouble was that Jesus was already well known in the area, the crowds that flocked to Jesus in Galilee back in Mark chapter 3 included many from Tyre and Sidon, and many in those crowds had been healed. That's why his presence could not be kept secret, he was 'too well-known to be hidden'. The woman's response on finding that Jesus was in the vicinity was to seek him out at once. Mark gives us a very clear picture of who she was. She was a Greek we're told in verse 26, not so much a description of her nationality, as of her culture and language, what students of classical civilization would call 'Hellenistic'. It meant too, that she was a pagan, she did not worship the God of the Jews. Mark goes on to tell us that she was born in Syrian Phoenicia, she was a local, indeed Matthew in his account goes so far as to call her a Canaanite, belonging to a people displaced by the Israelites when they conquered the Promised Land way back in the time of Joshua. Yet she comes and throws herself at Jesus' feet, begging him to drive the demon out of her daughter. She was pretty desperate, and, as we'll see in a moment, very persistent.

c) What follows is a highly unusual conversation between Jesus and the woman. Just look at verses 27 to 29:

27 'First let the children eat all they want,' Jesus told her, 'for it is not right to take the children's bread and toss it to the dogs.'

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

29 Then he told her, 'For such a reply, you may go; the demon has left your daughter.'

Here's a conversation that can be read like a parable. Parables are usually described as stories, drawn from everyday life, that illustrate spiritual truths. Sometimes the elements in a parable are assigned specific meanings or interpretations, Jesus himself did this when he explained them to his disciples, as he did with the Parable of the Sower (Mk 4) and the Parable of the Weeds (Mt 13). Down the centuries Christians have interpreted other parables in different ways, for instance, some of you may be familiar with St Augustine's very detailed and controversial dissection of the story of The Good Samaritan (I know Lee is). But the term 'parable' also covers the vivid illustrations and short, pithy sayings that Jesus used, drawn from things that were familiar to his hearers. When it comes to his chat with the woman from Syrian Phoenicia, it's usually interpreted something like this:

'Jesus' message, the good news, is the bread, the Jews are the children and the Gentiles are the dogs. It's not your turn to hear and get blessed, you'll have to wait, at least until all the Jews have heard. Maybe after Pentecost?'

'Such a long time, can't I have something to be going on with, just like the dogs sometimes get when they're fed titbits at mealtimes?'

'That's a clever reply. O.K., your daughter is healed. Now go home'

That probably sounds rather flippant, but I'm sure you get the drift. The Jews did refer to themselves as 'God's children', and to the Gentiles as 'dogs'. But the word that Jesus uses here for 'dogs' is unusual in Scripture, and not at all the word that the Jews would have used in relation to their neighbours. It means 'small dogs', household pets, we might even call them lapdogs, not the pariahs, the vicious hounds that roamed the streets and the countryside. I find it hard to accept that the one who described himself as '*gentle and humble in heart*', would be so callous as to tell this desperate lady to go away, that her case would have to wait until another time. Certainly, Jesus cannot have expected her to have a detailed understanding of Jewish tradition and terminology, she was a Gentile after all, nor could she be expected to fully appreciate the reasons for his arrival in the area. Perhaps he is indeed speaking to her in a 'parable', but one drawn from her own experience, from a Greek home, even her home. He is testing her, drawing out her motivation. Apparently, there were lots of 'miracle men' around in those days, did she simply regard him as one of those? However, she is not deterred by his apparent snub, and persists in her request:

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

And the reward for her persistence is given, not because of her witty reply, mothers in desperate need are not given to sparkling repartee, but because of her faith in Jesus. Matthew makes that abundantly clear in his account of the incident:

"Then Jesus said to her, 'Woman, you have great faith! Your request is granted.'" (Mt 15:28)

It's worth noting that this is the one instance of distance healing recorded by Mark. Jesus does not lay hands on the girl, he does not command the demon to leave as he does on other occasions, but the woman takes him at his word '*the demon has left your daughter.*' (v29) and goes home to find that all is well with '*her child lying on the bed, and the demon gone.*' (v30).

2. The Application

So, what can we learn from this encounter between Jesus and the Syro-Phoenician woman? How does it impact the way we think and the things we do? Three things:

a) The Gospel is Good News for all people. In his response to this woman's request, Jesus may not be encouraging for the present, but he is not dismissive for the longer term. A door of hope is left open, well, at least ajar, and she presses in on it. He signals the opening up of the Kingdom of God to Gentiles, both by word and action. There are many things that do not necessarily promote faith, hearing parables, seeing miracles, or being part of a privileged race, but being a Gentile is not one of them. That was a principle that the first disciples took time to grasp; Peter needed a vision and a visit to a Roman officer

named Cornelius to convince him, and the pattern of New Testament outreach was always, 'to the Jew first and then to the Gentile'. You see it in Paul's ministry and writings. In the first chapter of his letter to the Romans he says, *'I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes: first to the Jew, then to the Gentile.'* (Ro 1:16) Jesus is not afraid to cross deeply entrenched boundaries in order to bring hope and healing to this woman and her daughter. The good news of Jesus Christ, who he is and what he has done, cannot to be restricted by barriers of race, age, religion, gender or tradition. *'There is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved.'* (Acts 4:12). Salvation is found only in Jesus Christ.

The case of this woman was not unprecedented. The great 16th century Genevan reformer John Calvin said, *'At no time did God shut up his grace among the Jews in such a manner as not to bestow a small taste among the Gentiles.'* There were people like Naaman the Syrian, healed of leprosy, and the widow of Zarephath (a town near Sidon), miraculously fed during a time of famine. And Jesus' family tree mentions three women, Rahab, Ruth and Bathsheba, all included into Israel's royal line under surprising circumstances, and all Gentiles. Jesus' birth was marked by the visit of Gentile starwatchers and he ministered to the needs of other outsiders too, the Centurion whose servant was ill and the man who lived among the tombs on the other side of the Sea of Galilee. All this points to the wider blessing that was to come after Pentecost, this is good news for all people.

b) The Gospel is Good News for all kinds of people. One of the things some commentators note about this woman, is that there is no mention of a husband. Was she a widow, like her fellow countrywoman from Zarephath? Was she an abandoned wife, or always a single mother? Life probably wasn't easy for her, and she was acutely aware of her need. Too often, the church has been seen as comfortable, respectable and middle class. Although perhaps in recent years there has been a renewed concern for the needs of the homeless and the poor, we still need to heed James' warning not to show favouritism. And that can work both ways. Having lived in an area where there was a clear divide between social and private housing, I recall one church officer questioning the need to reach out to the more affluent, private area, as well as to the other, with the words, 'We don't want those Hooray Henrys coming over here!' As Paul put it, *'I am a debtor both to Greeks and non-Greeks, both to the wise and the foolish.'* (Ro 1:14) The Church of Jesus Christ is meant to be the ultimate 'Rainbow Coalition', drawn from *'every nation, tribe, language and people'* (Rev 14:6). Your wealth, nationality, social status and education are not relevant, the gospel of Jesus is good news for all kinds of people.

c) The Gospel is Good News that demands action. I've sometimes wondered what would have happened if this woman had said to Jesus, 'But you must come and lay hands on my daughter and command the demon to leave, it's what you always do!' I somehow don't think she would have got her answer. It was enough that she acted on his command to go, taking him at his word. The gospel demands that we act, Jesus' instruction needs to be taken seriously. Let me suggest two areas.

1. If you are a believer, a Christian, Jesus expects to be Lord in your life. He expects you to be involved in acts of service, to be his witness, to involve yourself in a local church and to make worship central to your life. That will include things like taking an active role in reaching out to others, sharing the Good News as there's opportunity, joining one of the church's ministry teams, and maintaining peaceful and positive relationships with other believers. In the scriptures, Christ clearly calls us to such things, we shouldn't be waiting for some special revelation or further direction before starting to do them.
2. If you have yet to put your faith in Jesus, then his word to you may not be so much 'go' as 'come'. Are you thinking that you need to know more, to get the 'theology' clear before committing yourself? Some of us have followed Jesus for years and still don't feel we've got everything sorted! Maybe you're thinking that you need to get your life a bit more in order before you can be accepted by him, or that you need to have some special experience, a particular feeling so that you will know it's true? Well, here's what's true; Jesus died on the cross for you, he rose again and is now in heaven for you. He offers you forgiveness, a new start and eternal life. All he asks is that you receive it, that you do as the woman from Syrian Phoenicia did and take the action that such Good News demands.