

A Reflection from Revd Ali for the 14th Sunday after Trinity.

In our Gospel reading (Mark 7: 24 – 37) we heard that Jesus had gone to Tyre. This was a predominantly Gentile region. I wonder if he chose that place just to have some time alone away from the Jewish crowds? Or maybe, after that bruising encounter with the Pharisees and Scribes, when he challenged them on their interpretation and implementation of the Levitical purity laws in last week's Gospel (Mark 7: 1 – 8, 14,15, 21 – 23) – an encounter that would have incensed the religious elite. I wonder, if Jesus visits a home in the 'impure' Gentile town of Tyre to emphasise his point about the Pharisees and Scribes judging those who did not conform to their ideas of 'purity'?

Whatever his reasons, Mark tells us that Jesus didn't want anyone to know he was there. But even there he could not escape notice (7:24). Even in that region, populated with mostly non-Jewish folk, word had spread about Jesus - his teaching and healing. Even there, there is a demand for his healing power.

It is in this context that Jesus has an encounter with the first of two people who would have been considered as 'unclean outsiders' by the Jewish community.

First, we hear of a woman approaching Jesus (7:26). That in itself would have been outrageous! It was unheard of for a woman to approach a man unaccompanied by her husband or a male relative. She was also a Gentile, a woman of Syrophenician origin. And as such would have been considered ritually impure, because she lived outside the land of Israel and outside of the law of Moses. Her daughter is possessed by a 'demon'. Although we aren't given any details of how this was manifest in her daughter, it may have been that she acted in bizarre or antisocial ways. So, the odds of this particular woman being an acceptable encounter for Jesus, were certainly stacked against her. And yet, and yet she has faith and courage. She has faith that the man that she has heard about can help her daughter. And she has courage to surmount all the societal norms and restrictions that would ordinarily push her into the background, and approach Jesus directly.

Jesus' response to the woman feels shocking to those of us who know the truth about Jesus' life and ministry. But I wonder if it was almost an involuntary response, fuelled perhaps, by 30 years of societal and religious indoctrination? Jesus says to the woman "Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs" (7:27). The children, being the people of God and the dogs everyone else.

It has been suggested that Jesus' harsh response was just quoting a bit of contemporaneous Jewish folk wisdom. Even if that was the case, it must still have been so very hurtful to the woman, who has summoned all her courage to approach Jesus. Some scholars suggest that Jesus was testing the woman to encourage her to affirm her faith publicly. But I wonder, if it was just the very human part of an exhausted Jesus, speaking before thinking, with a ready retort that would have echoed through his life and experience? Or perhaps Jesus had still not grasped the enormity of his mission, as Messiah for the whole world not just to the people of God? In Matthew's version of this story Jesus says "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel" (Matthew 15:24).

But the woman responds to Jesus with a clever response "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs" (7:28). Jesus can only agree. "For saying that, you may go", Jesus says. "The demon has left your daughter" (7:29). Jesus can only agree that God's love and healing power know no ethnic, political, or social boundaries. Mark tells us that "she went home, found the child lying on the bed, and the demon gone" (Mark 7:30).

From Tyre, Jesus then went to the region of the Decapolis, a group of 10 cities on the eastern border of the Roman empire. This was also Gentile territory. I wonder whether Jesus was still trying to escape notice and seek some more down-time or maybe, just maybe, the encounter with the Syrophenician woman had given Jesus a new understanding of his mission and ministry beyond his own ethnic origin.

Whatever Jesus' motivation, once again people who had heard about Jesus, bring those in need of healing to him. Once again, those who would have been considered unclean and outside of 'normal' society were brought to Jesus. One man, cut off from the world by his inability to hear or communicate with others is brought to Jesus by his friends, who beg Jesus to heal him (Mark 7:32).

This time, Jesus doesn't hesitate to respond to the desperate request. He takes the man aside and in a very physical and intimate way, heals the man. Jesus put his fingers in the man's ears, spits, and touches the man's tongue, and then says "Ephphatha!" which in Aramaic means, "Be opened!" Immediately, Mark tells us, "the man's ears were opened and his tongue was released, and he spoke plainly" (Mark 7:35). Suddenly, the man was able to hear and communicate with those around him. Not only was he physically healed but was also restored to his community.

So what do these two stories of encounters with the 'unclean outsider' mean for us today?

I wonder if there is there a message in these stories for us about our mission as a church? Even as we start to think about how our churches will operate post-pandemic, perhaps there is a challenge here for us to look outside our own communities. To think about how we might engage with those that we too often see as the 'other'? Are we being challenged to think bigger? To aim to be a church that embraces the outsider, the stranger or even the 'enemy'?

Perhaps these encounters can encourage us all to challenge the rise of nationalism, racism, and xenophobia that is unfortunately, alive and well in our contemporary western culture?

Or maybe, these stories are a reminder that God's love is more than enough for all of us. After all, at the end of the encounter with the Syrophenician woman, Jesus praises the woman's faith, and her daughter is healed. She receives the gift of salvation. These stories remind us that we are all included in this gift, no matter what our nationality, ethnicity, or social status, no matter how unworthy we might consider ourselves. Jesus sees beyond those worldly human classifications. Jesus sees us as we are; God's beloved creation.

It may be that we identify with these two people coming to Jesus, begging for his grace. Being willing to accept only crumbs. But Jesus seats us at the table and claims us as God's beloved children. Even though the crumbs from the table would be enough for our healing and salvation, Jesus has given each of us more than enough. He has set an abundant, life-giving feast for all through his unconditional love. It is just up to us how we respond to that gift.

Amen