

Mark 7:24-30 – Jesus and the woman from Tyre

Readings – Psalm 33:12-22 and Mark 7:24-30

Psalm 33

The first verse that was read to us from Psalm 33 was verse twelve, “Blessed is the nation whose God is the Lord, the people he chose for his inheritance.”

It's important to read the whole of this verse and to read it in context. Very often, pieces of Scripture are quoted out of context such as when the first half of this verse, “Blessed is the nation whose God is the Lord”, is quoted as a call for the United Kingdom to return to being a Christian nation.

But in context this verse means something very different. The psalm is a call for *Israel* to remember who she is and what God has done for her. God is the creator of the whole world (33:6-7) and is sovereign over all the earth:

From heaven the Lord looks down
and sees all mankind;
from his dwelling-place he watches
all who live on earth –
he who forms the hearts of all,
who considers everything they do. (Psalm 33:13-15)

But he has chosen Israel to be his own very special people (33:12). The psalm continues with a call to remember that and to trust in the God who has chosen them and is their God. This call is addressed particularly to the king as representative of and leader of the nation.

This psalm formed part of the self-understanding of the Jewish people: they were God's special people; God's chosen people; different from the rest of the world around them.

Mark 7:24-30 in context

I want now to turn our focus to the Gospel reading, Mark 7:24-30 – Jesus' encounter with a woman from the region of Tyre, often referred to as the Syro-Phoenician woman.

Again it's important to read this passage in its context.

Jesus had been very busy. He had fed the 5,000 (Mk 6:30-44). He had rescued his disciples from a storm on Lake Galilee (Mk 6:45-52). He had been mobbed by crowds seeking healing (Mk 6:53-56). He had been forced into a confrontation with the Pharisees over the failure of his disciples to wash their hands before eating food (Mk 7:1-23). In response, Jesus had declared that nothing going into a person makes them unclean: it's what comes out of them – their words and actions – that shows the nature of their hearts and whether they are clean in the sight of God. By this, adds Mark, “Jesus declared all foods clean” (7:19).

Encounter with the Syro-Phoenician woman

After this busy and challenging period of ministry, Jesus wanted a rest, so, “Jesus left that place and went to the vicinity of Tyre. He entered a house and did not want anyone to know it.” (7:24a). He had taken himself and his disciples off to a region where a Jewish prophet and teacher might go unnoticed. But Jesus could not remain hidden; his fame as one who can heal the sick had gone before him. And so we read in verses 24b-26, “Yet he could not keep his presence secret. 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. The woman was a Greek, born in Syrian Phoenicia. She begged Jesus to drive the demon out of her daughter.”

Now listen to Jesus' response (verse 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.’” What do we make of these words? They seem so harsh and uncharacteristic of Jesus.

His words seem odd particularly in the light of Jesus' controversy with the Pharisees – his controversy over cleanness and the food laws. These food laws and associated practices were distinctive markers of Israel as the chosen people of God: unlike the Gentiles, they did not eat pig – not even smokey bacon crisps! But Jesus had said that this was not what made a person clean in God's sight – it's what comes out of your mouth and the way you behave that God is concerned with. By saying this, Jesus broke down the barrier between Judaism and the Gentile world – Jesus declares all foods clean. God looks on the heart, not on ritual observance.

But here in his conversation with the Syro-Phoenician woman Jesus seems to be rebuilding the barriers between Jew and Gentile. Why does he speak to her like this?

One of the disadvantages of the written word is that you cannot hear the tone of voice, neither see the facial expression. In what tone of voice did Jesus respond to this woman's request, and was it with an angry face or a smile that Jesus said, "Surely you don't expect me to give the children's food to Gentile dogs"? Was he testing her and at the same time seeking to teach a vital lesson to his disciples – disciples who were so slow to learn what Jesus was teaching them?

This may well have been so; nevertheless, there is an element of seriousness in Jesus' words. Jesus was very aware that his earthly ministry – his ministry recorded in the Gospels – was *primarily* to his own people and not to the Gentiles. Matthew 10 records how Jesus sent out his twelve disciples to minister in his name. "Jesus called his twelve disciples to him and gave them authority to drive out impure spirits and to heal every disease and illness... Jesus sent [them] out with the following instructions: 'Do not go among the Gentiles or enter any town of the Samaritans. Go rather to the lost sheep of Israel. As you go, proclaim this message: "The kingdom of heaven has come near." Heal those who are ill, raise the dead, cleanse those who have leprosy, drive out demons... Truly I tell you, you will not finish going through the towns of Israel before the Son of Man comes.'" (10:1, 5-8a, 23b), Jesus' earthly ministry was to the lost sheep of Israel: to declare that the one for whom Israel had longed and waited had at last arrived; God had visited his people with salvation – he had visited them in the person of Jesus the Messiah.

So Jesus' words, though perhaps partly teasing and testing, also reflected a serious point: what right had this Gentile woman and her family to the blessings of Israel?

But hear her reply, "'Lord,' she replied, 'even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs.'" (v. 28). It's an extraordinary reply. She acknowledges that what Jesus has said is correct, she has no right to the blessings that belong to the people of God – but she looks in hope for mercy.

And listen to Jesus' reply and its consequences, "Then he told her, 'For such a reply, you may go; the demon has left your daughter.' She went home and found her child lying on the bed, and the demon gone." (vv. 29-30). Her faith and her persistence (her grit!) were answered by grace and healing.

In Jesus, the gates of the Kingdom are opened wide – taken off their hinges

Jesus meant what he said to the Pharisees: he had come as a deliverer to Israel, but he had come also as the one who would break down the barriers that separated Jew and Gentile. In Isaiah God had spoken concerning the one who would be called his Servant, "It is too small a thing for you to be my servant to restore the tribes of Jacob and bring back those of Israel I have kept. I will also make you a light for the Gentiles, that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth." (Isaiah 49:6). In Christ the gates of the kingdom are being flung wide open – open to all who will come in faith.

And the moment when the gates of the kingdom are flung open – a moment anticipated in this story – was with Jesus' death and resurrection – his work as the Suffering Servant of the Lord.

With Jesus' death the curtain of the temple was ripped apart from top to bottom. Listen to how Mark records it in Mark 15:37-39, "With a loud cry, Jesus breathed his last. The curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom. And when the centurion, who stood there in front of Jesus, saw how he died, he said, 'Surely this man was the Son of God!'" God, as it were, bursts out of the holy of holies. He can no longer be kept at a distance through barriers created by human sin; he is now with us and for us – not just for Jews but for Gentiles also, even for the Roman centurion who supervised his crucifixion!

As we come to Communion

As we come to communion, we celebrate Jesus death and resurrection. More than that, we know that we have a part in all that he did there: he did it *for us* and he is with us and for us. This, this celebration of communion, is a 'thin place', a place where the veil that separates heaven from earth is torn away and we know that God in Christ is with us and for us.

We know that though we are not worthy to be called his people – not worthy even to gather up the crumbs that fall from his table – yet he opens his arms to us and invites us to feast with him freely.

In Christ, by God's amazing grace, we also have become a people whose God is the Lord.

And as we come to celebrate these things, the challenge to us is this: Do we want to keep the blessings of the kingdom to ourselves: to construct again the barriers around the people of God; to boast of what God has done for us while, perhaps, looking down on those 'outside'? Or do we recognise that what Christ has done for us he has done for the whole world – breaking down every barrier? Do we invite all who will hear to, "Come to Christ, come to the feast. Come and welcome to Jesus Christ"?

Are we a people who show that all barriers to the Kingdom have been swept away and that all are welcome to the feast? May it be so, for his name's sake.