

ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE

WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON

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All Saints' Marseille

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Jesus is on the move once more, seeking a moment of peace beyond the familiar bounds of Galilee. He ventures into the region of Tyre and Sidon, present-day southern Lebanon, hoping to find solitude in this Gentile territory, away from the scrutiny and demands that have followed him. Recently, his own townspeople had mocked and rejected him, and for days he has tirelessly fed the hungry, healed the afflicted, freed the demon-possessed, and faced the Pharisees' challenges — all while having the well-meaning but often baffled disciples at his side. Surely, Jesus has earned a moment of reprieve.

Yet, respite eludes him. Instead, a persistent Syrophenician woman bursts into the house where he is staying, falls at his feet, and pleads for him to cast the demon out of her daughter.

“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.’”¹

To any ear, this must be startling. In Jesus' time, as in ours, likening people to dogs - even “little dogs” (as the diminutive suggests in the Greek text of Mark's Gospel) - is an offence. How could such words serve as a response to suffering and despair? We recoil from this kind of language when it is spoken in our daily lives, but when it comes from Jesus - the Christ of compassion of mercy – it feels especially unsettling. It jars against the image of perfection of Jesus we were likely taught to embrace as we grew in our Christian faith.

¹ Mk 7.27

As a woman and a mother, I cannot help but deeply empathise with this Gentile woman approaching Jesus. Her daughter is hopelessly ill, and any parent would be overwhelmed with anxiety, longing to provide comfort and healing. Anyone with a trace of compassion would feel her distress. Anyone would want to help her in any way they could.

Can we find a way to be reconciled with the awkwardness of Jesus' refusal? Over the centuries, theologians and preachers have wrestled with the discomfort this passage evokes. Some interpret it as a reminder that Jesus, though fully divine, was also fully human. This means not only divine empathy with the joys and sorrows of humanity, but also the possibility that Jesus could have experienced physical and emotional exhaustion, faced temptation and anger, and, at times, even felt irritation.

Some interpreters question what Jesus' understanding of his mission might have been at this particular moment of his story. When approached by the Syrophenician woman, his initial response seems to highlight the 'boundaries' - or rather, the priorities - of his mission, emphasising his call to serve his own people first. This can be challenging to accept, especially when contrasted with contemporary examples, such as some French politicians' commitment to 'préférence nationale', that is, the priority given to native citizens over foreigners in areas like employment, social benefits, and housing, to protect national identity.

A traditional view of this passage holds that Jesus, the sinless God-man, perfect in his divinity, was not subject to the failings of fallen human nature (such as capriciousness). Thus, it is suggested that every action of Jesus should be interpreted in a way that befits Christ's divinity. This perspective implies that Jesus had a deeper purpose in his seemingly harsh response to the woman, perhaps using his challenging words to test her and draw out an affirmation of her faith. Yet, this instance stands in contrast to other moments in Mark's Gospel, such as when Jairus, a synagogue leader, "pleaded earnestly with Jesus, 'My little daughter is dying.' Jesus went with him" and raised the girl, without questioning the father's faith.²

One feminist theologian³ feels that something important happens in this passage, asserting that the Syrophenician woman helps Jesus realise his identity as Christ, the Messiah. While I am reluctant to read the Scriptures

² Mk 5.21-43

³ Hisako Kinukawa – *Women and Jesus in Mark: A Japanese Feminist Perspective*

through an ideological lens, I agree with this author that something significant happens here. The encounter with this mother appears to mark a turning point, revealing a genuine shift in Jesus' understanding and suggesting that he is, indeed, evolving, 'on the move'. This perspective may be challenging to accept if one thinks of Jesus as perfect and immutable from birth, possessing omniscience and omnipotence. I'd like to remind you a few words from Luke's Gospel: when the 12-year old boy Jesus returns with Mary and Joseph from a visit to the Temple, the writer makes it clear that this boy had to mature in every way, just as we all do: "Jesus increased in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favour."⁴ Just as Jesus learned carpentry from Joseph, his growth in moral and intellectual stature must have been a genuine learning experience. If God chooses to be revealed to us within the limits of our humanity, then the possibility of growth and change must also be embraced.

The power and reach of the Kingdom of God extend far beyond what even Jesus envisioned in this moment within Gentile territory. 'Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs,' the woman replies with remarkable insight when Jesus declares that the time has not yet come for the Gentiles to be nourished with God's grace.

Jesus can only concede: "Because of this word (τοῦτον τὸν λόγον, in the Greek original), you may go – your daughter has been healed." In her reply, Jesus recognises the "word", a term Mark has already used to signify the Gospel, the good news of the coming of God's Kingdom⁵. Here, in this conversation, the presence of God is unmistakable: he is with the Syrophenician woman, who grasps that the good news has arrived, believing that Jesus can dissolve boundaries and widen the table of grace. God is also with Jesus, guiding him in his listening and response.

It is "because of this word" that comes to him in the encounter and conversation, that Jesus broadens the scope of his mission and ministry - not only to this woman and her daughter, but also to the man healed of deafness in today's Gospel reading. The restoration of humanity to the fullness of life now transcends the children of Israel. The good news of the Kingdom defies geography and purity laws, spreading more swiftly and widely than even Jesus had foreseen.

⁴ Lk 2.52

⁵ E.g. Mk 2.2 ; 4.33

God meets us – indeed, even Jesus himself – in the space of encounters and conversations. Through newcomers, strangers, and those who differ from us in countless ways, God widens our horizons and challenges the limits of our understanding. What would it mean to walk in the footsteps of Jesus, to respond to the urgent call of the Other? To embrace the wisdom that only a vulnerable outsider can offer? To announce the good news to those who do not look, speak, act, or worship as we do? To dissolve the boundaries? To widen the table?

The charge now rests upon us to carry forth the Gospel of Christ to all corners of the earth, even as we stand shoulder to shoulder with the Syrophenician woman, humbly seeking the crumbs of grace. Yet, as we approach the Lord's table, we are assured to receive not mere crumbs, but the Eucharistic feast – the very gift of eternal life.

Amen.