

## Jesus honours our faith and brings hope Mark 7:24-30

In our Bible reading this morning Jesus meets the Syrophenician woman, and when he does, he seems to act completely out of character. However there is a reason why He acts in this way and **it is a reason that gives us all hope!** That is I want to share with you today. Throughout the Gospel's most of the actions of Jesus make perfect sense, but our story doesn't seem to fit into that category. The way Jesus acts in this passage seems to be so out of character from him. In fact, this is the only occasion when Jesus denies someone, acting with delayed compassion towards them, when they come begging before Him on hands and knees for help.

Why does He act that way? Perhaps He is upset at her. He did not want anyone to know He was in the house, yet she has found him there. We know that Jesus has had a difficult time recently. So, maybe these are the actions of a man who is just overtired? Or it could well be that her nationality is against her. She is a Gentile born in Syrian Phoenicia where they spoke Greek and followed the Greek pagan gods and culture. Whatever the reason is, this does not seem to be the actions of the Jesus we have come to know, so let's have a closer look at our text to see what's going on.

To begin with, let's realise that it is not unusual for Jesus to want to "get away from it all". There are other occasions in the Gospels when we are told that Jesus went to a quiet place to find solitude. On these occasion's it is because a significant decision needs to be made or because Jesus has just been through an unusually difficult time. The later is the case here. Jesus has just gone through an unusually difficult time because He is constantly being misunderstood during his recent tiring ministry in Galilee.

There the Pharisees misunderstand Jesus. To them Jesus is public enemy number one. But they couldn't just get rid of Him because He was very popular with the Jewish people. Force was not an option, so they would have to discredit His reputation and this was proving to be a difficult task.

Mark 7:1 tells us that "The Pharisees and some of the teachers of the law who had come from Jerusalem gathered around Jesus". Why? To question Him and test His beliefs The fact that this is a special delegation of Pharisees from Jerusalem highlights the problems the leaders were facing.

The local Pharisees in Galilee couldn't handle the situation so they called in the 'big guns' from Jerusalem who were also silenced by Jesus. It was an act of humiliation for them and yet another reason for misunderstanding to grow.

But the misunderstanding doesn't stop there. It seems the general population doesn't really know Jesus either. Sure, he was their popular hero, but their dreams about His ministry were making it dangerous for Jesus. Mark 6:35-44 tells us about the miracle of feeding the 5000, an event which occurred just a little while before our story. John records the same event with some added detail. John 6:14-15 says: "After the people saw the miraculous sign that Jesus did, they began to say, "Surely this is the Prophet who is to come into the world". Jesus, knowing that they intended to come and make Him king by force, withdrew again into the hills by Himself".

The crowds wanted Jesus as king because of their view of the Messiah. One who in Jewish thinking is a powerful political leader and would crush the Roman oppressors. Such is the extent of the misunderstanding of the crowd. He is not a "Saviour who will be lead like a lamb to the slaughter". He is a "Saviour who will conquer in might". It was a misunderstanding that could lead to the premature arrest of Jesus.

In some ways you can rationalise the misunderstanding of the Pharisees and the crowds but that is not the end of the matter. Even the disciples don't have a clue about who Jesus is and what He has come to do. They are constantly being chastised by Jesus. In Mark 4:40 after the calming of the storm Jesus said to His disciples, "Why are you so afraid? Do you still have no faith?". Later, after the feeding of the 5000 Mark tells us that they had not understood about the loaves; their hearts were hardened. Again in Mark 7:18 Jesus rebukes the disciples. When they ask Him about the meaning of a parable He says, "Are you so dull?". Time and again the truth becomes clear, even though they were the closest to Jesus, the disciples didn't really know what Jesus was on about. As we see these truths unfolding an important question continues to grow. Does anyone understand who Jesus is? So far it doesn't look like it. Not the Pharisees. Not the crowds. Not even the disciples. No one understands! And then Jesus goes to the vicinity of Tyre in Phoenicia, another name for Canaan, a Gentile territory controlled by Syria. And here Jesus meets this woman.

It is clear that she is in the middle of a major crisis – her daughter is demon possessed. Mark 9 gives us an idea of the effects of demon possession. It shows that the possessed person is robbed of their ability to speak and describes how those possessed would be thrown to the ground with foam coming out of their mouth. This chapter reveals that a possessed person can be thrown into fire or water in order to kill the body. There is more to the issue than that because demon possession means that sin and evil is in total control. And this is a very serious matter that caused a lot of trauma, not only to the person possessed, but also to their family. It certainly would lead to a sense of hopelessness.

Then Jesus comes...

Does the woman wait at home hoping that Jesus will come past? No. As soon as she knows Jesus is in the area she immediately goes to Him. Why? Why does she act so immediately? Because she knows Jesus can do something, so she acts. What a contrast to everyone else we have met so far. The Pharisees see Him as an enemy and try to trap Him. The Roman government would have Him marked as a political threat. The crowds think they are following a great political king. And the disciples are at a loss as to what to think and how to react. Only this woman sees who Jesus really is. He is the Messiah who has compassion, compassion which she hopes will stretch beyond the borders of Israel.

As hope gives way to action, picture the scene. A Gentile woman humbling herself at the feet of Jesus, placing herself at His mercy. She does not move from this spot. She does not care if she is making a spectacle of herself. She doesn't say her request once, she continues to beg and plead with Jesus until her request is answered. How could Jesus refuse? But it seems that He does. Jesus seems to push her aside giving the impression that He wants nothing to do with her.

Look at 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". It is a most uncharacteristic response from Jesus, yet it is consistent with who He is and what He can do.

Time and again, Jesus in the Gospels had made it clear that His ministry, and the ministry of the disciples, is to be directed to the house of Israel. Matthew 10:5-6 "Do not go among the Gentiles or enter any town of the Samaritans. Go rather to the lost sheep of

Israel". Jesus is the Son of God. But even He must be obedient to the covenant. Jesus must work within the confines of a covenant which was made between God and His people Israel. It seems to be so biased, so exclusive, so hopeless. Until we look closer.

In circumstances where others have lacked understanding this woman shows real insight. For all is not as hopeless as it seems. Jesus has left the door slightly open when he says: "First let the children eat". A line of priority is set, yet the line is not limited. First the children, then the rest. Another opening is created when Jesus calls the woman a dog which is not as degrading as it first seems for it is used to describe a lap or housedog. This dog sits under the table licking the crumbs that fall. By doing this, the children are fully feed while at the same time, the dog does not go hungry, and the meal is not even interrupted. In reality this woman is not asking for anything which is contrary to the covenant, she is merely begging to be one non-Jewish person to benefit from the words given to Abraham in Genesis12:3, "and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you".

Time and again non-Jews in the Old Testament received an extra measure of this blessing which was promised through Abraham. There was Ruth, Rahab, the widow of Zarephath, Naaman and others. All of these were recipients of blessings from the hand of God, which pointed to greater kingdom blessings to come. This is the basis on which the woman makes her plea. She knows this request of hers is but a small crumb from the mighty table of the Lord. If Jesus was to fulfil her request, the blessing wouldn't even be missed by those who were eating the bread at the table of the Lord.

The faith of the woman displayed an astounding understanding of the work of Jesus. The Pharisees did not understand who Jesus really was, they only see an enemy. The general population still think Jesus will become the imagined political Messiah of the Jewish people. The disciples are constantly chastised because they don't understand Jesus' teachings. Only this gentile woman really understands who Jesus is and how He works: He is a compassionate Messiah who will respond to those who come to Him in faith no matter what their background; and He is a Messiah who will pass on the blessings of the covenant to those who were originally God's enemies. And that is where we come into the picture.

For the fact of the matter is:  
we are just like this woman from Syrian Phoenicia...  
We are dogs! But we are the dogs for whom Christ died so that the Spirit may come upon us as well.  
In His dealings with this woman Jesus gives a foretaste of the blessings which would come to her Gentile nation. These blessings are now poured out to us freely, without exception.

It is also true that we, like this woman, are in a crisis. The crisis which arises when we are being controlled by the effects of sin and Satan. When Jesus heals this little girl He is showing His power over sin and over Satan. Jesus is the one who is restricting the power of the “strong man” spoken about in Mark 3:27.

Jesus has come and He is in the process of tying up the “strong man” so that He can enter the house of the “strong man” and carry off his possessions. That’s the crisis we were in... for we were the possessions of the strong man. And, unless we see Jesus for who He really is, we will continue to be the possession of the strong man.

So, just like this woman, we also must act in faith. Faith which fully expects to see the compassion of Jesus poured out on us; knowing that the blessings of the covenant are just as much ours as they were for the Israelites. Faith which comes before the Lord when we are facing any crisis, being fully assured that even the crumbs from the table of the Lord are more than sufficient to meet even our most difficult needs. Faith which comes before the Lord in prayer fully anticipating a response from Him, for the Lord will never turn away from those who trust in Him.

When we see this passage in this way, it explains why Jesus seems to be acting so out of character. It’s not because He is upset at her. It’s not because He is just overtired. It’s not even because this woman is a Gentile. It’s because Jesus wants everyone- the disciples, the crowds, the readers of the Gospel, everyone to know who He is. He is the Lord who will show great compassion to all who come to Him in faith as He gives a small foretaste of the triumph, which, He will secure at His death, the triumph of victory over sin. A triumph which delivers us from the hands of Satan and brings us into the family of God no matter who we are- For Jesus honours our faith and brings everlasting hope!