

Sermon 6 September 09

Gospel: Mark 7:24-30

Feeding the Dogs

Let the Children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs.

Mark's Gospel leading up to today's reading has dealt primarily with issues of relevance to the Jewish population. Jesus has been for the most part in his home territory. Today's reading moves the drama out of Galilee and into the region of Tyre, to the north west, out of Jewish territory and into the homeland of the so-called Phoenicians. The Gentiles.

Jesus tries to be alone but he is discovered by a woman who is ethnically a Syrian, hence the term 'Syrophenician'. She is a Gentile. She bows before Jesus and begs for his favour. She appeals to Jesus to save her daughter who is possessed by a demon. He responds rudely and dismissively to the effect that she is not one of his priorities, she is a dog and not worth his attention. This is hardly the Sunday School ideal of gentle Jesus meek and mild. However, this woman is up for an argument and responds to Jesus using his own cryptic terms and says that even the downtrodden dogs have to eat. He is perhaps stopped in his tracks by this response – he is 'bested' as one Gospel commentary says.

These few words are all about challenging conventional boundaries, about seeing the order of the world differently and about seeing other people differently. They are about inverting our conventional social order to make it the order of the Kingdom.

I think this passage is one of the most densely packed parts of the Gospel so let's try to unpack it a little to see what's inside; I will draw on some of the words.

Jesus *went away to the region of Tyre*. He has gone out of Jewish territory into Gentile territory. He takes a risk – this is a dangerous place especially for foreigners and has a threat of bandits on the open road.

Jesus goes into a house and doesn't want any one to know he is there – *Yet he could not escape notice*. The urgency of Jesus' mission overtakes even his own desire for solitude.

“And she came and bowed down at his feet.” The Gentile woman honours Jesus by bowing down, she recognises his divinity. She has seen something which the Jewish authorities have not. She has taken a risk in honouring a Jewish man whom she might ordinarily avoid, for fear of the rebuke she eventually receives. However, she recognises Jesus for who he is.

Boldly then, she goes on to ask, to beg, Jesus for a favour – *'to cast the demon out of her daughter'*. In effect she asks for a foretaste of heaven, the Kingdom of God, because who would not think they had reached paradise if their mortally ill child recovers?

But this encounter is potentially a scandal – a Gentile woman alone with a Jewish man has implications. It has implications for rectitude and for ritual purity. People would ask meaningful questions about what was going on!

Then Jesus responds, in the predictable manner of Jewish men to Gentile women at the time saying '*Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs.*' Jesus in a few words characterises the whole social order of the time. The children are the children of God. They are the Israelites, the first, the chosen ones, the top of the pile. The Gentiles are the dogs – ritually unclean to Jews, worse than criminals perhaps and of no account in their social order, not deserving even to be fed.

After having her presumptuous appeal to Jesus so thoroughly rejected it might be expected she would slink off cowed and beaten. But like so many of the women of the Bible this one is made of tougher stuff. She responds to Jesus in his own terms – as an equal – saying '*even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs.*' This brave woman challenges the conventional Jewish order of the world to imagine another where even the lowest on the social ladder deserve consideration.

For perhaps the only time, Jesus is brought up short. The whole structure of his socially conditioned response to her is challenged. Possibly he is dumbfounded, his response is contrite – '*For saying that, you may go – the demon has left your daughter.*' – Jesus recognises the truth in her words and shows her the foretaste of heaven she is looking for. Matthew's version of the same story attributes Jesus response to the woman's faith. This woman has not only displayed her faith but also proclaimed the injustice she endures.

In the social order of first century Palestine this event goes against so many of the expected practices between the cultural groups. It is, as we might say, '*highly irregular.*' its implication is to turn the whole social structure upside down – Jews and Gentiles are equal, Gentiles deserve to be treated well and they are inheritors of the Kingdom of God as the Jews are.

This passage from Mark shines a light into the very centre of our social life together, and points to how we regard and respond to the people around us. Not to 'our tribe' that is our family and intimate friends but to most of the others around us – the people we see but don't really know.

So how do we really treat the Gentiles in our lives? In an urban community like ours there are lots of Gentiles, in fact most people are Gentiles, not of our immediate acquaintance, not of our family or our tribe. They are incomers from other countries, the ones who get the last parking spot, who jostle us in the train, who have the music on just a little bit too loud, who have not attended to their front garden quite as expected in our street, who have opinions that are a little suspect, who vote for that other political party.

Country people are fond of criticising the city for being unfriendly – and it is true that in a small country town where you know every one in it (and they know you!) the mode of relationships is different, for country people know they will need to live with each other over years and of course they must work to maintain a relationship that is enduring. The dynamic in the city is different. We can set up our little tribal groups without having to worry about all the Gentiles because we probably won't see them again, so we don't really have to worry about them.

Martin Buber, a Jewish philosopher of the early to mid 20th century, investigates this dynamic between people in his little book *I and Thou*. He talks about our social structure consisting of *Is*, *Thous* and *Its*.

Is are ourselves, the being with whom we are most intimately aware and, because we are only human, aware of beyond everyone else.

And there are the 'Thous' – our intimates, those we love. Buber says these are really the ones in whom we see God – the Thou is God, Thou recognises that Thou is made in God's image, that Thou is worthy to be regarded in some way as divine and to be loved for it.

The *Its* are all the rest, the people with whom we have no intimate relationship, who we do not regard as being as important as our tribe. They are our Gentiles, the ones who get the last parking space. They are the people we treat as tools for our own projects. They do things for us, we do not do things for them. They may get the crumbs from under the table but we don't let them see paradise – or worse we don't stop to think about them long enough to imagine they might want to see heaven, let alone be fed. When we look at them we fail to see God.

But are we not all made in God's image? If that is true then all the Gentiles we come across, all the *Its* deserve to be seen as images of God. That means they are no longer *Its* but *Thous*. That means they are no longer tools for our projects, they are fellow inheritors of the Kingdom of God, they are also chosen ones, they are also children of God.

Is this how we regard the world and the people in it? Is it how they regard us? Of course it isn't. Jesus and the Syrophenician woman together challenge to us is to invert this worldly structure in which we live, to see God in every other person, to recognise their God-likeness and to respond to them as divine. To make all our *Is* *Thous*. It is the demand of social justice, it is a demand to feed all the children first, not just with the crumbs but with the plenty of the table. When we do this we will have inherited the Kingdom of God.

... even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs