

Faith of an outsider

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Date: 07 June 2015

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[0 : 00] So my suggestion is we look at this together. We can sing afterwards and share any comments on the passage. Lord, show us yourself in the pages of Scripture.

Glorify your name. Please give us a glimpse again of how wonderful you are. For we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.

Amen. So this is about this Syrophoenician woman from Syrian Phoenicia.

And here's the context. It is, as I've said, in the middle of a flow of stories. It's always important to look at the context. It's not just a story that you take as if it came from anywhere and could fit back in anywhere.

It's part of a flow of things. It is between the first thing about bread, the feeding of the 5,000 in chapter 6, and the follow-up to that in chapter 8, the feeding of the 4,000.

[1 : 33] Those are both about bread. And this is about bread, isn't it? It's not right to take the children's bread and toss it to the dog. So we're on the theme of bread.

And there is another word which links that with the feeding of the 5,000. It's this word, to be filled. It is not...

First, let the children be filled. Let them eat all they want. And that's the same word as is used in chapter 6, verse 42.

They all ate and were filled, were satisfied. It's also in the middle of a sequence where Jesus is radically reorganizing people's thinking about clean and unclean.

So in chapter 7, the Pharisees were appalled that Jesus' disciples ate without first washing their hands in a ceremonial way.

[2 : 44] Not a medical way, but a ceremonial way. Because the Pharisees were working on the assumption, A, that you can get spiritually polluted by stuff that you've touched with your hands.

And B, that you could get spiritually clean by washing your hands. And Jesus doesn't disagree that there is clean and unclean.

But what he does, he really fills that up with meaning and says, really, that's a very superficial idea of clean and unclean. That you touch things with your hands and you wash with water.

It's a much deeper idea than that. And the things that make unclean, he says in chapter 7, verse 20, it's not food, it's what comes out of a man that makes him unclean.

For from within, out of men's hearts come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly.

[3 : 50] All these evils come from inside and make someone unclean. So it's not what you touch with your skin, it's what really touches your heart.

What really goes on inside you. Those sorts of things. So Jesus is challenging the current thinking about clean and unclean.

Although he doesn't use the word, he uses the word common as the word in chapter 7. And in the passage that we're looking at, we have somebody who is ethnically unclean.

Because this lady is not a Jew. She is from one of the foreign nations. So that's a statement of being unclean.

And the problem that she has is with an unclean spirit. That's literally what the spirit is. So, you see there's a context.

[4 : 51] There's things in common. And also, by way of context, we're in the middle of between the feeding of the 5,000 and the feeding of the 4,000.

And at the end of the 4,000, feeding of the 4,000, Jesus is going to say, Okay, you've seen this. You've been in on it. Have you understood it?

So, in chapter 8, verse 17, at the end of everything, he says, Do you still not see or understand? Are your hearts hardened?

Have you got it? Is what he's going to be saying. Do you have eyes but fail to see and ears but fail to hear? And don't you remember?

And he's going to challenge them on this. You've seen all this stuff. You were there. Have you got the point of it? Or are your hearts hard?

[5 : 51] And that's the question that's buzzing around. Have they got the point of it? And in the middle of this, we have this woman who, as we shall see, in a way, you couldn't really expect her to get very much at all.

But in fact, she seems to get the whole thing. And this is one of those remarkable things. The first shall be last. The people that you really think would get the point don't get it or seem on the verge of not getting it.

But somebody you wouldn't have thought really would see it at all. She sees the whole thing immediately. So that's an introduction. She seems to understand very well.

So let's just do it a bit at a time. Number one, let's look at the location of Jesus. So verse 24, Jesus left that place and went to the vicinity of Tyre.

He entered a house and did not want anyone to know it. Yet he could not, he was not able to keep his presence secret. Interesting inability of Jesus. Jesus can do things.

[6 : 55] But there's a sense in which he could not keep his presence secret. So he's in Gentile territory. It doesn't necessarily mean that he went into the center of the city of Tyre.

It just says into the vicinity of Tyre. So Tyre had an administrative district. So he's sort of gone over the border into that. It's the only time, I think in Mark at least, that he goes into Gentile territory.

So this is the one time Jesus has something to do with a Gentile in Mark's gospel. And why is he there? Well, my suggestion is that he's still looking for what they were looking for in 631, which was a bit of peace and quiet.

In 631, the apostles gathered around Jesus and reported to him all that they had done and taught. There were so many people coming and going that they didn't even have a chance to eat. And he said to them, come with me by yourselves to a quiet place and get some rest.

So I suspect that they still haven't had that rest. And they've gone somewhere out of the way, quiet, where nobody's going to bother them. And I think that's why they're there.

[8 : 06] It shows that Jesus does appreciate that people need rest. He doesn't expect us to be like machines. They're just working 24-7. He's in a house.

He entered a house. Houses are quite interesting in Mark. A house is always the place where you can get a conversation with Jesus. He will say things to people on the outside, which might be rather puzzling.

But when they're back in the house, the disciples can say, hang on, Master, what did you really mean by that? So the house is a good place to be from that point of view. It's a place of deeper insight and answered questions.

And actually rather a good place to be with Jesus, isn't it? It would be great to be in the house with Jesus so you're not just sort of stuck on the outside with the thousands of people and not really understanding what he's saying.

But it's a privileged place to be in the house with Jesus. That's a good place for us to be, isn't it? Can I put it that way? In the house with Jesus. That would be good. Let's look now at the approach of the woman.

[9 : 11] Verse 25. In fact, as soon as she heard about him, a woman whose little daughter was possessed by an evil spirit, by an unclean spirit, came and fell at his feet.

I'm just unsure about that word possessed because I can't remember what it said in the original for that. But the evil spirit is an unclean spirit.

So she heard about him. The woman was a Greek born in Syrian Phoenicia. She begged Jesus to drive the demon out of her daughter, taking it a bit at a time then.

She heard about him. In 3 verse 8, some people had already come from Tyre and Sidon, right back at the beginning to find out about Jesus.

It is 3 verse 8, isn't it? It says, many people came to him from Judea, Jerusalem, Idumea, the regions beyond the Jordan and around Tyre and Sidon. So it's quite possible that some of them had heard about Jesus in those early days, gone all the way back, and talked to people.

[10:20] Do you know, what did you do? What did you do a few months ago? We missed you. I went down to wherever it was. It was a Galilee area. I went down there, and because there's this amazing bloke, Jesus, and I shall always remember some of the things he said, and the things he did were absolutely amazing.

So maybe the woman has heard from that. You get the point. He's going to somewhere where he's relatively anonymous, but not completely anonymous.

So the woman knows something. As soon as she heard about him, who's that stranger? I don't know. Who's that stranger? He's the one that I saw when I went down to Galilee.

Do you remember a couple of months ago? Is he? So she's heard something. But not a lot. But as we'll see, it was enough. And it says, as soon as she heard about him, this woman makes a direct line to Jesus and falls at his feet.

I think that's a rather brilliant reaction, isn't it? As soon as she hears, even though she doesn't know a great deal, she thinks, that's what I want.

[11:38] That's who I need to go to. It puts us in shame sometimes because we're quite slow to come to Jesus sometimes, aren't we? We who know so much, and yet we're reluctant, and we're busy, and we're tired, and everything.

But this woman, who knows so little, says, right, that's exactly where I need to be. As soon as she heard about him, she comes and falls at his feet.

Falling at Jesus' feet, I think, is a capital G, good capital T thing. It's a good thing, isn't it? It's a right reaction to Jesus.

It's a display of, well, it's an approach. Do you remember, we were thinking this morning about Adonijah, who, when push came to shove, went as far from the king as he could, and tried to find safety somewhere else, the woman, in her need, gets as close to the king as she can.

She approaches him, and she falls at his feet. I think that's an attitude of very deep respect. That's a right thing, isn't it? Right thing. We learn from her.

[12:48] And she begs Jesus to drive the demon out of her daughter. The word beg, it's not an extreme word. There's a word that's used on early February, really pleading, but it's not that word.

It's just an asking. She's asking. She's requesting. She's asking, Jesus, please will you drive the demon out of my daughter? So that's her request.

And we learn a lot from her. She's a Gentile. She doesn't have the background. She doesn't have the tradition.

She hasn't come from a Christian family, if I could put it that way. She's come from nowhere. And yet, what a great example she sets in the way she comes to Jesus.

Please, this is the huge problem I'm facing. This is the spiritual need I have. I can't do it myself at all, but you can.

[13:51] Please, will you do it? And in that request, seems to me, there's an assurance of his ability. Would you agree with me? She wouldn't bother if she didn't feel very strongly that he could do this.

Please, will you do it? She doesn't come to him saying, can you tell me, you know, give me a score out of 100, whether you think he could do this. I mean, what are the chances? No, 50-50, 60-40? She doesn't do that. She says, you can do this. Please, will you do it? She asks him. And I think also, she's optimistic, at this point at least, about his willingness.

Because she wouldn't have bothered going there if she didn't think that there was a good chance that he'd say yes. There's lots of reasons why he might say no, which we'll come to in a moment. But she's got an instinct that it's quite possible that he'll say yes. So she's optimistic about his willingness.

[14:50] And she is dependent on his decision. I think there is a proper humility about the way she approaches him.

I don't think she's saying, you know, I demand that you do this for me. This is my right that you do this for me. That would be quite a different approach, wouldn't it?

That would be quite a different approach. She's saying, please will you do it for me? She's requesting. I'm depending on you, Lord. I'm asking you.

I'm not telling you this is what you've got to do. And I'm not, you know, I'm not taking the authority myself. That's not my place to do that.

I'm asking you. I think there's something rather lovely about the way she approaches Jesus. Do you get the feel for that? I think it's really, really lovely.

[15:46] So let's look now at this dialogue. So, first, proton, protos, first, big thing.

you've lost your first love, your protos love. First, first thing, first important thing, says Jesus. Let the children be satisfied.

It's not right. It's not good. It's not a beautiful thing to take the children's bread and toss it to their dogs. It's an interesting answer, isn't it? It's a very interesting answer.

And it's so Jesus. I think it's so Jesus. Because what he seems to do, what he seems to do is, well, he seems to say it's not right.

He seems to say, what you're asking me, I can't do that. It's not right. He seems to say, it's not, you know, it's a wrong thing. It's not a right thing.

[16:51] That's what he seems to be saying. It's not right to do this. He also seems to be calling the Jews, the children, and the non-Jews, dogs.

That's what he seems to be doing, isn't it? Verse 27. First, let the children be satisfied. It is not right to take the children's bread and toss it to their dogs.

What does he mean? Well, I think it's an ethnic thing that he's saying. I've come to the privileged nation, the Jews, and you're not one of them.

Let's face it. Let's be realistic about this. I have come first for them, and so, not for you.

That's what he seems to be saying. Paul has a similar thing about the gospel coming first to the Jew, then to the Gentile. I think this is in order of historical time.

[17:58] But here, he says to this woman, so, you know, sorry. Sorry and all that, but, let's be honest, you're a dog.

These are the children, so, there we go. So, he seems to refuse. He seems to refuse. She reminds me a little bit of the woman at the well, actually, because she's got enough feistiness to not take that no for an answer.

And she's brilliant, really, isn't she? Let's come to her in a moment. I think this is very vintage Jesus. He's a very alive person, isn't he? He's a very, I don't know, you can almost see the twinkle in his eye. He's not predictable.

You know, he doesn't, forgive me, but he doesn't say, well, before I answer this, I'll look in the, in the Westminster directory of public worship, and what does it say I'm supposed to say?

[19:07] Ah, yes. He doesn't, it's not predictable like that. He, it's so spontaneous, and so, so real. This, he seems to refuse.

And I think we can learn something about the way Jesus reacts, to people. Sometimes he does seem to refuse. Sometimes he does seem to be unwilling.

Sometimes, if I can put it this way, he seems uncooperative. And, that's an invitation to relate to him. It may be that we have misunderstood, and the actual answer is going to be a refusal, but it may be that Jesus wants us to engage, and come back to him.

It's certainly the case with this woman. He's waiting for her to come back to him on this, which is exactly what she does. So, the woman, now, bless her, verse 28, she doesn't say, what doesn't she say?

She doesn't say, oh, kiri, no, Lord. She says, nay, kiri, yes, Lord. And that's, there's a big difference, isn't there? Peter, when, Jesus was talking about him going to the cross, you remember?

[20:28] He says, no, Lord. And I always remember somebody saying, this is a contradiction in terms. You can't have a Lord to whom you say no, no, Lord.

And she, she deftly doesn't fall into that particular pitfall. She doesn't say, oh, hang on, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, yes, Lord.

So, good for her. But she doesn't stop there and say, yes, Lord, okay, I'll go home now. She says, well, here's another thing she doesn't say.

She does not dispute with him about this dog-children thing. She doesn't say, don't you call me a dog. I'm not a dog. I'm a grown-up.

I'm a full person in my own right. And don't you start trying to play any racial things, she doesn't say that. She says, I'm not going to dispute that. Because, as far as I'm concerned, I think this is what she's saying.

[21 : 30] If that means I'm unworthy, that's the case. I'm not going to dispute that. In the Anglican communion service, it says, correct me if I'm wrong, but I think it says, we are not worthy to pick up the crumbs under thy table.

I had a friend a long time ago who invited me to tea and mentioned this and said, this is completely, you know, I cannot accept that.

Communion service says, we are not worthy to even to pick up the crumbs under thy table. That's nonsense. I suppose, to many people, to be honest, it would be.

They'd say, hang on, I'm not saying that. I am worthy. Something deeply right about the way she doesn't contest that.

I'm not worthy. If that means calling me a dog, whatever animal metaphor you wish to use, I'm not going to dispute it. No, I'm not worthy.

[22 : 35] So she doesn't dispute that. But she does say, she does estimate crumbs will be enough. This is what she's saying, isn't it?

Yes, Lord, but even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs. What I would like to do, I'd like to take what you've said, not challenge it, but point out that crumbs fall off the table for the dogs and crumbs would be enough.

Now, to say crumbs will be enough is actually a statement about the preciousness of the bread. Isn't it?

It's saying the bread that we're talking about is so adequate, is so powerful, is so sufficient.

Actually, for me, I don't need very much of that. Just a bit would be more than adequate. It's a statement about the bigness of the provisions, about the greatness of the bread.

[23 : 40] It's such good stuff, I only need a bit of it. Few crumbs will do. That's an estimate of Jesus, isn't it? Do you agree with me?

She's saying, you know, he's so great. You know, I don't need much, really. That would be brilliant. And she does use Jesus' own picture to press him for inclusion.

So she's saying, as it were, I know you, Lord, and I know that really you do want to include people and I know that it isn't really in your heart to say no to me.

And so I want to come back to you on this. Crumbs will be enough. Crumbs is okay. Let's have some crumbs. Even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs.

Well, what does Jesus make of it? He says, that is just the reply I was looking for. Isn't it? I mean, he doesn't say that in so many words, but that's the idea of it, isn't it?

[24 : 49] For such a reply you may go. Question, question answered, problem solved, need provided for, the demon has left your daughter.

He doesn't even go to the daughter, he doesn't touch her, he doesn't even say a particular sort of word, he just says it's happened. It's all taken care of, just go home now.

He sees in what she has said, great faith.

He doesn't use the word faith, but I think we can deduce that if he's saying this is a good reply, which he is saying, and if he is answering this, that what in fact the woman has been displaying is faith.

And what is the content of this faith, or what are the characteristics of this faith? She has a really high view of the magnitude of Jesus.

[26 : 06] He's not just a traveling miracle worker who can do a few things, he's bigger than that.

And she has a faith which sees the fundamental willingness of Jesus. He is willing to do this.

It's just a question of persisting a bit, of engaging with him. Sometimes his willingness is the query.

The leper says, if you are willing, you can make me clean. But I think she does see his fundamental willingness. And of course she's got a great view of his power.

She doesn't ask him to come with her, she doesn't ask him to give her some medicine, she just says, you know, you can do it, and Jesus does it. He heals at a distance, and the girl and her mother are delivered from evil.

[27 : 11] lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. It's a great prayer, powerful prayer.

And this girl is delivered from evil, and of course we don't meet the girl, we just meet the mother.

She's delivered from evil. So bring it to a conclusion.

It's the specific example of Jesus dealing with somebody who is unclean, disqualified, and he meets with this person.

That's essential in the gospel, isn't it? The gospel is not about us being qualified to receive Christ's grace.

We don't come to him and say, well, I've got these vouchers, and I've got this CV, and I've got this list of achievements. It doesn't work like that, does it?

[28 : 24] Nothing in my hand I bring, simply to your cross I cling, naked come to you for dress, something look to you for grace.

things. It's about whatever the something is. The other song says, the vilest offender who truly believes that moment from Jesus a pardon receives.

is such a radical thought. It's a bit difficult to handle, because we sort of instinctively say, well, okay, that's theoretically possible, but do we, can it really be that somebody, let's say, who was an awful sinner, can in one moment come to Jesus, and instantaneously, at least in principle, find a new heart, kind forgiveness from the Lord, and completely without qualification, find such abundant grace and forgiveness.

Jesus includes the unclean and the disqualified, and that's what he's doing here. another conclusion, Jesus deals with individuals to draw out faith.

It's worth noticing, isn't it? He deals with her to draw out faith. We can lose sight of that, I think, lose sight of it in the busyness of life. One of the chief things that Jesus is looking for is people of faith, people who have learnt to trust him.

[30 : 12] Not quite the same thing as being busy, is it? Not quite the same thing as being active. It leads to action, but the point here is this engagement.

Do you believe in me? And he does it maybe by appearing to be reluctant. I think it was Luther who said that the secret of prayer is not that you're trying to twist God's arm to make him do something he doesn't want to do.

The secret of prayer is to lay hold of his willingness. And I think as I've got older I've got more of the hang of that. Maybe I haven't, but I can see what he's saying.

Prayer isn't trying to tell God what he's got to do to twist his arm. It's saying, Lord, you do want to do this. This is something that you are willing to do.

And laying hold of God in that way. And the final conclusion, Jesus can do it.

[31 : 23] The almightyness of Jesus. I know that Jesus doesn't always do everything that we want him to do. And I know that not everything is within his policy and his purposes to do.

And sometimes we find that vexing. But in principle, you'll understand me if I put it this way, there's nothing he can't do. Jesus can do it.

We stop there. So in a moment we'll see.