

Amazed Beyond Measure (End omitted)

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Preacher: Paul Barker

[0 : 00] This is the evening service at Holy Trinity on the 17th of July 2005. The preacher is Paul Barker.

His sermon is entitled Amazed Beyond Measure and is based on Mark chapter 7 verse 24 through to chapter 8 verse 10.

Amen. Just imagine the sort of trouble you would get into if you called a foreign woman that you met a dog.

They might well complain. I mean if it was a foreign woman who had a bit of oomph about her she'd probably slap you in the face. She might call the police. If my mother heard me saying that to a foreign woman, you dog, well she'd probably still try to send me to my room.

And the last person you ever expect to hear calling a foreign woman a dog would be Jesus. You wouldn't think that he'd do it. But in tonight's passage that's what he does.

[1 : 39] Is he just a naughty boy? Or is something more going on here? Well let's see what this passage is saying to us and what we learn about Jesus from it.

In the past two weeks we've seen Jesus feed 5,000 people in a miraculous meal. And then engage with some hostile Pharisees about the issue of cleanness and uncleanness.

There is an element in which Jesus is trying to avoid certain parts of northern Israel. In Jesus' day in Israel, the land of Israel was divided into various segments.

Ruled ultimately by the Romans. But under the Romans by different people. And around Judea and Jerusalem it was ruled by a Roman governor or procurator.

Because Herod the Great's son in that part, Achelaus, was so bad that nobody wanted him there. So the Romans put their own person there. But up in Galilee it was one of Herod the Great's other sons.

[2 : 49] Herod Antipas, who was also a pretty bad guy. And earlier on, again in early part of chapter 6, we saw that he had beheaded John the Baptist. And because of the acclaim and fame of Jesus, the following of Jesus, which far exceeded the acclaim that John the Baptist received, there is every possibility that Jesus represented a very high threat to Herod Antipas.

And so it seems from about the beheading of John the Baptist, Jesus almost goes to lengths to keep out of the territory that Herod Antipas ruled in Galilee.

One of Herod the Great's other brothers, sons rather, Philip, he ruled some other part to the west and north of the Sea of Galilee. That seems to have been safer. And Gentile territories seem to be safer.

I say all that because it helps to explain the journeys and travels of Jesus that we see in the passage before us tonight. Having engaged with the Pharisees and the scribes on the issue of who or what is clean or unclean that we saw last week, in verse 24, we see that from there Jesus set out and went away to the region of Tyre.

Tyre is in what is modern day Lebanon. It's a sea coast city on the Mediterranean coast. It's Gentile territory, not Jewish territory in Jesus' day.

[4 : 13] We're not told that he actually goes to the city, but to its region. And the region extended well inland from Tyre, the city. So it's to the north of Herod Antipas' territory. Jesus goes into that region, presumably to some village or town.

We're not told the name of it. He entered a house. He didn't want anyone to know he was there. And yet he could not escape notice. Even here, well outside the boundary of Israel, in Gentile territory, he couldn't escape notice.

And verse 25 tells us that a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit immediately heard about him and came and bowed down at his feet. We ought not to be surprised at the extent of the fame of Jesus at this point.

Even back in chapter 3, there are people who've come even from Tyre and Sidon and other places outside Israel to hear and see this Jesus. Word has spread quickly and far and wide.

And so he comes to this pagan area. It's the only time, it seems, that he goes into pagan territory. And it's the only time he leaves Israel in this little episode here in chapter 7 and the journey that follows it, bringing him back down into the territory of Israel.

[5 : 33] In some ways, what Jesus is demonstrating is what he argued with the Pharisees last week. That is, it's not what goes into a person that makes a person clean or unclean, but it's what comes out of their heart that makes them unclean.

In a sense, we saw last week that Jesus did away with the Jew-Gentile distinction, in a sense saying it's people's hearts that make them unclean. And as a Jew, travelling in Gentile territory, going into a Gentile pagan house, perhaps eating there or staying there, Jesus is not making himself unclean by being in such company.

He's actually modelling what he was arguing in the passage we saw at the beginning of chapter 7 last week. And this woman comes to him, whose little daughter, we're told, doesn't have an evil spirit.

We're told here, at first, an unclean spirit. Probably deliberately to use the language of unclean that was used last week in the first part of chapter 7. So, she'd heard about Jesus and she came and bowed down at his feet.

Maybe not quite an act of worship, but certainly an act of some high respect. A person in chapter 5 who bowed down at Jesus' feet was Jairus, the synagogue ruler whose daughter was dying and then died before Jesus raised her to life.

[6 : 55] And here you get the extremes in contrast. The synagogue ruler, a high man in Jewish society, and a pagan woman. And they both come at separate incidents and bow down at Jesus' feet.

We're told in verse 26 in this translation, the woman was a Gentile, literally that she was a Greek. You probably need to know that Alexander the Great, despite the film that was on, that flopped a year or so ago, was in fact a great world ruler.

And by the age of 30, it conquered pretty much all the known universe, including Israel. And so, from that time, Israel and all the surrounds of the Middle East became what was called Hellenized, from the Greek word for Greek, helles.

And so, the people of Jesus' days spoke Greek. And this lady may well have been Hellenized. She may have been a local Syrophoenician woman, not actually from Greece, but she's been Hellenized.

She's part of that Greco-Roman pagan sort of culture, and maybe indeed spoke Greek as well. But the word Greek came to be used for Gentile, for non-Jew, for an unclean person in Jewish eyes or Jewish thinking.

[8 : 12] She shows Jesus this remarkable respect, and we're also told in verse 26 that she begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter.

She kept on begging him, is the sense of it. That is not just fall down a once-ass, but there was a persistence, a bold persistence, about her requesting of this Jesus to cast the demon out of her daughter, the unclean spirit, as it was called in the previous verse.

And Jesus calls her a dog. It's hardly the response you'd expect when he says to her, let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs.

It's an odd saying. And some people try, I'm so baffled by the fact that Jesus might be in effect calling this woman a dog, which is what he seems to be doing, that they try all sorts of ways of reinterpreting it.

But quite simply, Jesus is referring to her as a dog, literally a pet dog, not a wild dog. So it's maybe not quite as bad as it could have been, but still not perhaps that polite.

[9 : 32] What's he saying? Simply, it seems, the children are the children of Israel, the children of God, Jews, and the dogs was a sort of derogatory way in common use for Jews to refer to non-Jews, to Gentiles, Greeks.

They're the dogs. And Jesus is saying to this woman here that the Jews have a priority in the plan of God.

Let the children be fed first, for it's not fair to take their food, the children's food, and throw it to the dogs. Here is a pagan Gentile woman coming to Jesus.

And Jesus is saying to her in a slightly obscure way, in a sort of odd way, in a saying really, salvation comes to the Jews first.

And the woman's response shows vast humility, vast persistence, and a high degree of faith. I should also make the comment though, Jesus is not saying here that salvation is only for the Jews, because actually in the thread of what we see in Mark 7-8, we see in fact, the clear and intentional gospel mission beyond Jews to Gentiles.

[11 : 04] Jesus says, let the children be fed first, and don't throw the children's food to the dogs. That is, there is a priority of Jew first, then Gentile, for the gospel.

That's actually what Paul argues in the letter to the Romans, in Romans 1, and then in Romans 9-11 at more length. That is, the way God works for the salvation of the world was to bring, in a sense, the gospel to Jews first.

We see that fundamentally in the Old Testament and mainly in the ministry of Jesus. But in the rejection, by and large, of Jews to the gospel, the gospel then goes to the Gentiles, of which probably all, or at least most of us here tonight, are beneficiaries.

Not that God has now cast off the Jews, not at all, as Paul argues in Romans 9-11, and as indeed we see his ministry in the New Testament as well. But now the gospel is for anyone and everyone.

And in a sense, that's what Jesus was arguing on the unclean, clean matter in the first part of the chapter. That is, what makes somebody unclean is not that they're Gentile and the Jews are clean, but it's what comes out of their heart.

[12 : 16] In a sense, Jesus is putting every person, Jew and Gentile, on an equal footing before God about whether they're clean or unclean. Now Jesus, in saying this word to the woman, may well have been testing her reaction.

That's what some seem to think. Certainly he evokes from her a strong reaction of humility and faith and persistence. She says back to him in verse 28, Sir, literally Lord, a statement of very high respect if not worship, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs.

Now what she's acknowledging there with some humility accepting the derogatory term dogs in a sense, is that it's not simply Jew first and then Gentile, but using the analogy of feeding children and pets that the pet dogs actually in one sense eat at the same time, the crumbs that come off the table.

She's not looking for a feast but a crumb. There's an element of her humility exposed there. But she's challenging the absolute priority. Why do I have to wait for all the Jews?

And maybe Jesus has said this word to her in order to provoke some further response to see what she says, what she thinks. And certainly she comes back with strong faith in the ability of Jesus, strong persistence in keeping on coming at him for salvation for her daughter or healing for her daughter.

[13 : 56] She comes with great humility prepared to accept crumbs and prepared to be called in a sense a dog. and she shows great understanding of what Jesus is actually on about.

And he replies to her in verse 29, for saying that you may go, the demon has left your daughter. Jesus doesn't even pronounce a word of healing.

He tells her to go but the healing has already happened. That is, there's a commendation for saying what you've said for your statement of humility and faith and persistence, your daughter is healed.

He doesn't refuse her. I think it's probably right to see that these odd words of Jesus referring to her as one of the dogs is not personally rude to her, it's using the common language but it evokes from her a strong claim of faith and humility before Jesus far beyond in fact what we see from any of the Jewish leaders and even the disciples to this point in Mark's gospel and indeed I think we're meant to see a significant contrast.

She went home, verse 30 says, she found the child lying on the bed and the demon gone. From at a distance Jesus has cast out an unclean spirit making in a sense a Gentile woman's daughter at least clean.

[15 : 27] The very thing that the Pharisees of the early part of chapter 7 would have been horrified about thinking how could a Gentile be clean for if a Jew even associated with a Gentile or touched a Gentile they become unclean.

But the language is in a sense showing that even Gentiles by the power and grace of Jesus can be made clean and indeed we're seeing from that woman, the mother of the daughter, stronger faith than any of the Jewish leaders and disciples to this point.

It's a deliberate contrast I think. It's showing us the spread of the gospel, the ripples out from Jewish homeland into Gentile territory and surprisingly finding more faith in Gentile territory than in the Jewish homeland to this point.

In a sense this Syrophoenician woman, this pagan Gentile woman anticipates the climax of Mark's gospel as a whole. For as Jesus hangs on the cross and dies, a Roman centurion, that is a Gentile pagan, Roman centurion, declares truly this man was the son of God and that's who Jesus is and that's the declaration that Mark's gospel is working towards.

Not to take us by surprise because that's what God said in chapter 1, this is my son, but it's not till we get to that point, the climax of the gospel that we find that declaration but on the lips of a Gentile.

[16 : 57] And in a sense this woman's anticipating that, that it's from Gentiles, surprisingly, that we find these great statements and expressions of faith. You see, sometimes we sort of expect little faith from some people and are surprised and bowled over when they might respond to faith.

There's in a sense a challenge to hear about our own evangelism and witnessing. I know that it's very easy to give up on some people and think they'll never respond to the gospel of Jesus Christ.

But actually humanly speaking, nobody will ever respond to the gospel of Jesus Christ unless God works in their heart. Because God is powerful in any person, any person may respond. So there's a surprise here, this woman's responded.

Why don't we see the response from disciples or Pharisees who knew their Old Testament so well? This is the sort of woman that we may well be thinking, she's too hard outside gospel ministry.

But actually every person's too hard outside gospel ministry, apart from the fact that it's God who converts. It's perhaps a challenge here to us to think, who is it in our lives?

[18 : 10] Who are our non-Christian family members or friends who we've sort of got a gut feeling they're never going to become Christians? Christians. And so we don't do anything about it. Here's a surprising declaration of faith.

It ought to challenge us never to give up on anybody but to pray for anybody no matter how hard and remote from God they might appear. That God will work in them. Because in his sovereign mercy he may well do, he can do.

Well Jesus continues his foreign journey journey. We're told in verse 31 that he returned from the region of Tyre. He went by way of Sidon towards the Sea of Galilee in the region of the Decapolis.

And I must say the critical commentators laugh at Mark because they think he's got no sense of geography. One commentary I've read says that this describing this journey is as though you're going to Brisbane from Sydney via Melbourne.

A few weeks ago I had some five days holiday in Darwin to visit my sister. I was trying to get free flights on frequent flyer points and I couldn't get anything to go to Darwin but the best I could do was if I paid to fly to Adelaide then I could get a free flight from Adelaide to Darwin.

[19 : 31] But here's the catch to get free frequent flyer points I would have had to fly from Adelaide to Alice Springs, that's not too bad, to Cairns and then to Darwin.

Well the whole five days it seems to me would have been taken up just trying to get there, I might as well have walked. So I gave up on that and just paid for a flight. Now Mark's geography actually shows us the extent to which Jesus keeps out of Herod Antipas' Galilean territory but it's not a ludicrous journey.

I'm sorry I haven't got organised enough to have a map but if you can picture in the centre Herod Antipas' Galilee, Jesus is north of that at Tyre, I'm trying to do this backwards so that you can look at the right way but I'm not going to manage that.

He goes further north to the area of Sidon, he doesn't go all the way to the coast, it's just the region of Sidon and Sidon's territory came all the way into Damascus so that's a long way in from the Mediterranean and he skirts up and around and then he comes down, sorry I've done it the wrong way for you, down on the far side of the Sea of Galilee in the area of Philip, one of the sons of Herod the Great who wasn't a baddie and kept going down to another region of the Decapolis and then came in through the Decapolis area to the Sea of Galilee.

That is, it's a long way round, very scenic but he's keeping well away from Herod Antipas. The Decapolis literally is ten towns, Deca, ten and Polis, city, town, ten of them and they were a sort of alliance of ten towns, mainly Gentile in culture but they had plenty of Jews living in them.

[21 : 20] Most of them were on the eastern side of the Jordan River, in fact all of them were, they included in fact Damascus and Amman, now the capital of Jordan and a number of other cities and just one of them south of the Sea of Galilee on Israel's side, Beit Sharm.

So, it's again Gentile territory, at least Gentile culture, mixed population but fairly much a pagan culture and Jesus has come in through the Decapolis towards the Sea of Galilee which did actually border the Sea of Galilee, the Decapolis did on the southeastern side of it.

Well enough of the geography for now, for those who hate geography can switch back on. again we find that the fame of Jesus is widespread. In verse 32 they brought to him a deaf man who had an impediment in his speech and they begged him to lay his hand on him.

So, even in this Gentile mixed area, Jesus is already well heard of and people come to him. We're not told about the deaf man what he thought or believed, if anything in Jesus.

Other people it seems are taking the initiative. They brought him to Jesus, a bit like in Mark 2, where men take a paralyzed man to Jesus in Jewish territory.

[22 : 33] We're not told whether the man is Jewish or whether he's Gentile, but it's certainly in this mixed population area of the Decapolis that this occurs. We're told that he had a speech impediment.

We're not told what that impediment is. That he had some speech indicates that he wasn't deaf from birth, he'd become deaf later on. And the language of speech impediment is a very rare word.

It actually occurs only twice in the Bible. And the other time it occurs in the Bible is actually in the Greek translation of the Old Testament from Isaiah 35, which we'll come to a little bit later on.

But I think the significance of using such a rare word is to direct our thinking back to Isaiah 35, which as I say we'll look at in a minute. Unusually in healing this man, Jesus sort of does things before he's healed.

Often Jesus says, like he did for the evil spirit, go, your daughter's been healed in effect. But it's not quite so simple here. Jesus took him aside in private, away from the crowd.

[23 : 38] We're not quite sure why, whether it was to minister personally to him, to get out of the way as though some people might misunderstand. We're not sure. He put his fingers into the man's ears.

He spat and touched his tongue. And then he looked up to heaven and sighed. And then eventually he said, Ephphathah, that is, be opened. Why couldn't he be in front of the crowd just say, you're healed?

Would have worked. But it seems that he's communicating to this man what he's going to do, telling him in advance. That is, the man's deaf, so he won't hear the word be healed, or be opened rather.

So in a sense, by putting his finger in his ear, he's showing the man, he's saying in effect, I'm going to heal your hearing. And by spitting and touching his tongue, he said, I'm going to heal your speaking as well.

When he prayed, he looked up to heaven to show the man that he was calling on God to do the work. So he's communicating, you see, visually to a deaf man by sight and by touch as well.

[24 : 43] Before he actually heals him. Notice how he says the words of healing, be opened. That is, Jesus, by using the passive verb, not say open, but be opened, he's acknowledging that it's God who does the opening.

And he's commanding the ears to be opened and the tongue to be able to speak and so on. And immediately it happens. There's no sort of speech therapy or rehabilitation that the man requires.

He starts speaking plainly as a result of all of this. As the end of verse 35 says, immediately his ears were open, his tongue was released and he spoke plainly, which is astonishing.

Because if you're able to do some operation on a speech impediment, you would still need some time, I would presume, to get your speech normal. Not so here. Just like so many of the miracles of Jesus, not only is there an instant healing, but all the process of, if you like, recuperation or restoration, that's all concentrated in to be immediate.

When he calmed the storm, there was no sort of gradual ebbing of the waves. They all stilled straight away. And so here, instantly healing and perfect restoration of speech and hearing.

[26 : 00] And Jesus tells people, as Annette pointed out before, not to tell anyone. Isn't it amazing? Surely Jesus needs a better PR agent at this point.

Doesn't he want people to know and bring him a claim? A number of times he tells people, don't tell anyone. In chapter 1, in chapter 5, later on again in chapter 8.

Probably what's going on is Jesus is not wanting to sort of create too much misunderstanding. He's probably wanting to deaden the popular opinion. He knows where he's headed, to the cross.

He knows that will come about because of the acclaim. But he's got a few more things to do yet before the opposition will develop to that extent. Well, the general reaction is amazing.

In this mixed population area, a Gentile culture area, they were astounded beyond measure. As so often has been the case in the Gospels, so here, astounded beyond measure.

[27 : 04] He even makes the debt, or he's done everything well, which echoes what God says of the creation back at the end of the six days of creation. God saw everything that he'd made and behold, it was very good.

Similar language here. He's done everything well. He even makes the deaf to hear and the mute to speak. Now, I already commented that the speech impediment is a word that occurs only in Isaiah 35.

This acclaim here, he's done everything well. He even makes the deaf to hear and the mute to speak, also resonates with the language of Isaiah chapter 35.

Now, so often in the Scriptures, it's not so much a proof text, that is, as though one word or one verse is being taken, but the whole context of the Old Testament passage in Isaiah 35 is not insignificant.

It talks about the wilderness springing to life. Even in verse 2, it talks about that happening to the glory of Lebanon, which is where Tyre and Sidon were, that he's just been to in that area.

[28 : 11] Verse 5 and 6 of Isaiah 35 say, Then the eyes of the blind shall be open, and the ears of the deaf unstopped. The lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy.

And then in verse 8, it talks about a highway that shall come through the wilderness to take people to God, and the unclean shall not travel on it. And in the language of Jesus from last week, earlier in chapter 7, it's about who is clean and who is unclean.

And what Jesus is doing is making people clean, even Gentiles. That's the highway. Jews may be unclean, Gentiles may be clean, and they are clean only through Jesus.

And then the chapter ends with a statement of praise. The ransoms of the Lord shall return and come to Zion with singing. Everlasting joy shall be upon their heads. They shall obtain joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.

Which used to be a chorus I used to sing in my university days. All of that is telling us who Jesus is. He is the long-awaited Messiah who brings the kingdom of God, redemption, restoration.

[29 : 23] He's the one who ransoms people for God. Pays the price. We'll see how he does that at the end of Mark's gospel. He's the one who brings spiritual reconciliation with God.

Though the Jews still live in the promised land, they're far from God. They live in a wilderness, as we saw two weeks ago with the feeding of the 5,000. But Jesus is the one who brings them not to the promised land, but to God.

And that's what the background of Isaiah 35 in this case is all about. Indeed, all through Mark, Isaiah is a significant background, giving us information about the extent of what Jesus is doing and what he's on about.

So no wonder at the end of chapter 7 that they acclaim with praise he's done everything well. He even makes the deaf to hear and the mute to speak.

And it's from these words and these events, in a sense, that that great hymn by Charles Wesley comes. Oh, for a thousand tongues to sing my great Redeemer's praise.

[30 : 30] The glories of my God and King, the triumphs of his grace. Hear him, you deaf. His praise, you dumb, your loosened tongues employ.

You blind now see your Saviour come and leap, you lame for joy. My gracious Master and my God, assist me to proclaim and spread through all the earth abroad the honours of your name.

What we're seeing are glimpses of the kingdom of God. Glimpses of the unclean made clean. Glimpses of physical healing pointing to spiritual reconciliation with God.

It is glimpses that remind us that heaven will be perfect in every single way. It ought to be something that we look forward eagerly to. We ought to feel the frustration of living as imperfect people in an imperfect world.

We ought to be longing for our hearts to be made clean. We ought to be longing to give God the perfect praise that is his due. We ought to long for people, even Gentiles of other nations, to be gathered to God by his grace and to praise him.

[31 : 50] And so often we're counting the sleeps to our holiday, counting the sleeps to the next Harry Potter book, counting our sleeps to Christmas. But whilst we can't count how many sleeps it'll be, we ought to have an even higher expectation and longing and eagerness for the fullness of the kingdom of God.

But too often, you see, our world can be too distracting. We can be too caught up in the attractions of our world which are so fleeting and so deceptive. Heaven ought to be our hope, our eager longing.

We ought to be frustrated every day with this world for its evil and sinfulness, its imperfections and futility and frustration. Well, the final episode that we're looking at tonight is the first section, paragraph of chapter 8.

It's the feeding of 4,000 this time. Some people think that Mark must have got it all wrong. How could Jesus have done two of these sorts of things? Hasn't he just botched his history? But not at all.

There is great significance in this event by contrast to the feeding of the 5,000 that we saw two weeks ago. The feeding of the 5,000 was riddled with Old Testament background to show us the fulfilment of Old Testament Jewish expectation.

[33 : 10] But now we're in a different locality. Now we're in the Decapolis area. Now we're with a mixed population, Jew and Gentile together, having a meal together miraculously provided by Jesus.

That is, it's still showing us the smashing down of the old Jewish unclean, clean distinction. Jews and Gentiles having a meal together, 4,000 of them no less.

A meal that's provided miraculously for a mixed population in a mixed area, a Gentile cultured area. There are fewer Old Testament allusions here which give indication of the mixed population.

Indeed, the word for giving thanks is more the Greek word than the Jewish word when Jesus gives thanks for the food before distributing it. It's reminding us yet again, in the debate of chapter 7, who is unclean?

It's not a racial distinction. Those who are clean... ..

[34:12]