23rd in Ordinary Year B

Readings: James 2:1-10 and Mark 7:24-37

Let us start with that most remarkable story from Mark’s Gospel when Jesus appears to be calling a gentile woman, a dog.

The passage follows on from a discussion about clean and unclean food. Now the passage moves on to clean and unclean people, in the Jewish sense, of being acceptable or unacceptable people in the sight of God.

When it comes to the clean/unclean food argument, Jesus demolishes the whole concept that certain foods make one unacceptable before God. Jesus thereby presumes to cancel the authority of the Torah wholesale. The Torah was believed to have been given to Moses by God, so Jesus is making a blasphemous claim to divine status in Jewish eyes.

In this passage concerning the Syrian-Phoenician woman, despite how it looks at first, the argument is continuing in the same direction. There are no intrinsically unacceptable or unclean people to God any more than there are any intrinsically unclean foods. It’s what lies in the heart that matters to God, not ethnic origin, be that child of Abraham or gentile.

In the healing of the gentile woman’s daughter, we see Jesus extending the frontiers of his kingdom. He came to give the children of Abraham, as the Covenant people, the first chance to fulfil their sacred duties and receive the gospel. He is not surprised that the gentiles should also find a place, but there may a degree of surprise on Jesus’ part that the gentile mission was to happen so soon. The following story of Jesus going again to a gentile area beyond Galilee to heal the deaf mute is a symbolic announcement of all that is to come. Jesus makes those who were mute in singing God’s praise (the gentiles) to be able to speak, and those who were blind to the reality of God (the gentiles), to be able to see.

So it is that the children of Abraham would by their refusal to accept Jesus as the messiah throw the Bread of Life to the dogs (as they called the gentiles), whilst the gentiles, the surprised recipients of such a feast, would eagerly receive the Bread of Life to their own salvation.

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The stories that depict Christ himself beginning the mission to the gentiles and setting aside the food laws of the Torah were of vital importance later for the Church, when some argued against Paul who was introducing such a policy.

Phoenicia, in which Tyre and Sidon were situated, was supposedly part of the Promised Land. In Joshua 19:28 when the Promised Land is allotted to the tribes of Israel, the tribe of Asher is allotted Phoenicia, including Tyre and Sidon. But the Phoenicians proved too strong and the land was never incorporated into Israel. So what the Old Covenant had failed to do, Jesus was proving capable of completing. Jesus was winning and extending the Promised Land to the full extent to which God had always desired. Whilst their Jewish ancestors had been unable to win the ground over for Judaism and the laws of Moses, Jesus was seen to be winning them over to his cause. Jesus’ kingdom plainly can and does incorporate gentiles.

But Jesus was not achieving this expansion through military might, but through love and his healing touch, which we again see in the following story of healing the deaf-mute man in Decapolis beyond Galilee.

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Jesus is warning the Church not to judge by outward appearances, or according to worldly conventions. In this case, he is challenging the Jewish fashion to discriminate against gentiles, as if they were dirty dogs. A dog is a dirty, scavenging beast in many cultures, not a cuddly house pet that plays with your toilet roll as it is in the West.

The passage from James 2:1-10 is another warning to the Church not to discriminate according to worldly values, by favouring the rich and looking down upon the poor. For the people the world considers rich, may have nothing at all of any worth in the sight of God, and those whom the world considers outcasts and poor many actually possess riches beyond compare stored in heaven - which is the only place that having riches makes any sense in the long term.

Jesus worked to tear down all the barriers between people and in tearing down the curtain dividing off the holy of holies in the temple Jesus was destroying the barrier between Jew and gentile, God and all humanity.

Even so, the Church has spent a great deal of time and energy right from the beginning of its life trying to rebuild as many worldly divisions as it can. In so many ways, the Church has reversed the direction of the gospel.

- by discriminating against the poor as in James 2, or as in Corinth when the wealthy non-working Christians arrived first and ate all the food at the Agape supper before the poorer working people got there.

- by discriminating against gentiles such as in Paul’s battles over gentile circumcision and the imposition of the Jewish food laws.

- and subsequently over the centuries at various times and places against soldiers, actors, bookmakers, women, laypeople hidden behind the roodscreen, immigrants and some Christians would add to that list a continuing discrimination against homosexuals.

The point of so many bible passages is that when we do judge we tend to do it BADLY. As God said to Samuel over his choice of the youngest, weakling son with eyes like a girl, a lad called David: “The Lord does not look at the things man looks at. Man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart.” (1 Sam 16.7).

The Jews were badly wrong in their view of the unacceptability of the gentiles. The Christians in the Church of James were badly wrong in their fawning over the rich and shunning the poor.

However, it’s NOT just a matter of judging OTHERS badly - we can also judge OURSELVES badly too.

Often we overestimate our own goodness - but it can also be that sometimes we underestimate ourselves - and that can be just as dangerous.

Why is it that children from disadvantaged areas do less well at school, those from broken homes more likely to divorce, daughters of teenage mothers more prone to become teenage mothers themselves, children of criminals, more likely to go to jail themselves?

Part of the answer is that they grow up with the wrong assumptions about themselves. They LIVE DOWN to the role they believe they have been assigned.

The Syrian-Phoenician woman in Mark 7 was prepared to challenge the assumption that Jesus would not help her because she was “a gentile dog”. She refused to play that part.

Jesus throws the phrase at her that she ought to have expected from him. Would she accept the usual assumption about how Jews treat gentiles? Would she believe that God’s Son would have no time for her, despite her need? Would she continue to play the role of the unwanted gentile?

No, she can break out of that. She challenges it. “Dog”, she may be, but even the dogs get to eat what the children throw down from the table. Knowing that Jesus was in her area to gain some respite from the rising hostilities among his own people, she is prepared to say that if the Jews don’t want him, the gentiles will be all too happy to accept him. If the so-called “children” of Abraham don’t want him, why should the so-called gentile “dogs” not have what the children have thrown out?

That is the sort of faith Jesus is looking for, wherever it may be found. That is a channel of faith God can use.

God in Christ can and will call, bless and use you too. There is no pre-determined status you must have to qualify. Whether you’re a worthless dog in the eyes of the world or not, that doesn’t matter one jot; it’s just a matter of believing that it is possible in a world that says it isn’t.

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