

SUNDAY 6 SEPTEMBER 2015

Reading – Mark 7:24-30

BACKGROUND

Mark is telling us today that Jesus went to Tyre. He is not saying why. In fact we have more questions than answers in this passage. Tyre was outside Israel, meaning that it was considered as unclean to be there. So Jesus went into a house. Why? We do not know. Why this specific house? We do not know. But then a gentile woman came and fell at his feet, which was a sign of honour and respect. She was Greek and born in Syrian Phoenicia. Her daughter was possessed by an evil spirit. In today's world and language we would translate it as being ill, as illness was regarded as "demon possession".

Tyre was an ancient Phoenician city-state located on the Mediterranean coast 20 miles south of Sidon and 23 miles north of Acre. According to Herodotus, Tyre was founded around 2700BC as an important Canaanite city in Phoenicia, its name meaning 'rock'; called Zara or Zaru by the Assyrians and Tyros by the Greeks. The modern Arab town of the same name was built over the ancient site. Today it is part of modern day Lebanon.

One of Tyre's most coveted exports was purple dye. Phoenicia, a place-name meaning "purple" or "crimson", translation of Hebrew *Canaan*, "land of purple". Joshua could not conquer the territory (Josh. 13:3-4). Israel had relations with the two cities, but especially with Tyre. David employed Tyrian stonemasons and carpenters and used cedars from that area in building a palace (2 Sam. 5:11). The construction of the temple in Jerusalem during Solomon's reign depended heavily on the materials and craftsmen from Tyre. About

870BC Ahab married Jezebel, the daughter of the Phoenician king, bringing Baal worship to Israel's court.

So she begged Jesus to cure her daughter. But Jesus did what most priests would do. He insults her by calling her a dog and eating the children's portion. Then she answers Jesus by saying that the dogs do eat the children's leftovers. Then Jesus says to her that because of her faith, she can go home knowing her child is well.

Mark is telling his Jewish listeners that even a Gentile can have faith in Jesus and even a Gentile can experience God's inclusive Mercy, Love and Compassion. Yes, Jesus' love will never ever let any human go unattended!

SERMON

I really struggled this week to concentrate on the text because it was just so striking that the woman in our passage was also born in Syria and that we heard so much of the Syrian refugees this week. I think we all were shocked to see the image of a three year old body of a boy lying on a beach in Turkey. Really shocking!

I am always amazed on how God speaks to us. Nothing – not the thousands drowning in the Mediterranean sea could persuade the world to do more. But then one photo sparks the whole world into action. I did not like the picture being shown to the world. It did not feel right or respectful to the deceased or to his family. But then as events developed through the week, this picture, albeit gruesome and sensational, led the world to action.

And then is it not amazing that our text also speaks of a woman that was born in Syria, a Gentile woman to whom Jesus showed compassion, love and mercy - something that no Jew of his time would have done. It is just so striking that in Jesus' day, his people

would not have helped this woman or her daughter, because she was a heathen, a gentile. And in our day, the same is happening – a lot of people in Europe and in the UK are of the opinion that these refugees need to go back to their war torn countries. But again God worked in the hearts of different people because last night on the 11 o'clock news I saw how the people of Austria and Germany welcomed the refugees....

But let's face it – we are not only like this with regard to the Syrian and Afghan refugees, but in our own villages and cities we often behave in the same way. Even in the Church, this behaviour is evident.

Yes we all have our prejudices and enemies, people that we do not like, People that we will not help, People that we will ignore, People that we will not forgive, people that we regard as a burden in our lives.

So, this morning, Jesus is asking you and me just one question - are you going to help the one that is totally different from you, the one that you do not like or appreciate, the one that is a thorn in your flesh? Are you going, this year, to focus all your attention on hating this person or are you going to ask God to help you to get rid of the "toxic poison" in you? Are you going to show compassion and love or are you going to walk away?

Whatever we do, we must always remember that Jesus' action spoke louder than His words. As Christian believers we should respect one another's differences, we should show love when hatred is surrounding us, we need to show compassion when prejudice and exclusiveness prevails, we need to show mercy when the rest of our society is throwing petrol bombs, erecting fences to keep the

unwanted out. We need to stand out and stand up for any injustice, untruth that so often is part of our lives.

But there is also another side to Jesus' compassion. If you are the one that is always excluded from invitations from friends, if you are the one that is always last to be mentioned by friends, if you are the one that is ignored because of your gender, sexual orientation, or faith – Jesus is telling you something as well. If you are the one that is abused or bullied – Jesus is telling you to stand up and challenge your oppressors. Do not be content with the crumbs from other people. No - stand up for what is right and just and end any abusive relationship, end it today. Confront the bully with the help of your Redeemer and Lord. Do not allow anyone to make or tell you that you are not worthy. Jesus died for your sins as well. For you He endured the darkness of the cross and cried at the last, "It is accomplished". For you He triumphed over death and rose in newness of life. All this He did for you. Do not forget that God showed you compassion and love. Do not settle for second best because in God's eyes you are important.

May the actions of Jesus resonate with us all as we start the new week. But let us ask God to help us because I do not think we, as humans, can achieve this on our own.

Let us pray: Lord God your love is so wide like the rain that falls equally on the just and the unjust, help us to love like you. Strengthen us therefore to rid ourselves of every form of prejudice so that we can love the poor as well as the rich, the simple as well as the clever, those like us and those very different, those who are kind, amusing and easy to love and those who are disagreeable, dull and rude, help us for the sake of Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.