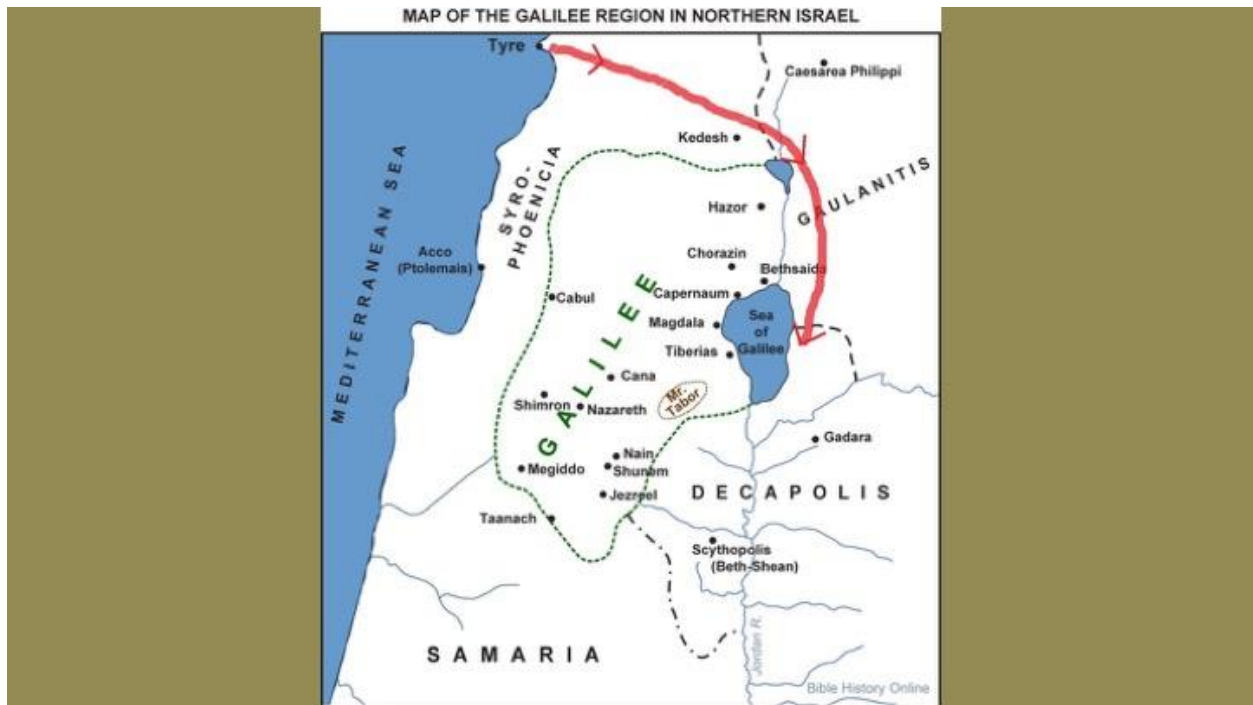


SERMON: 9 September 2018 – Rev Alistair Cowper

**“Everything he does is wonderful!”
(James 2:1-10, 14-17 and Mark 7:24-37)**



This story of the healing of the Syro Phoenician’s daughter, in light of the culture of that time, is phenomenal. She was a foreign-born woman with a demonised daughter - an unlikely candidate to seek out a Jewish healer. The racial divide of that day was quite pronounced, but we see in this encounter, that love and faith overcome every barrier, including racial prejudice.

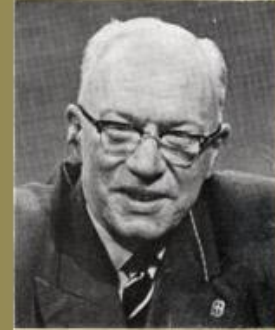


Map of Tyre.

Here was the Rabbi Jesus, in a foreign land speaking with a Canaanite merchant woman. Canaan included the region of modern-day Lebanon and parts of Syria. A Canaanite would refer to a non-Jewish person who lived in that region. It was in this region that Queen Jezebel established Baal worship and it was near there that her body was eventually thrown to the dogs.

This region of Canaan, Syrian-Phoenicia, had been granted to the tribe of Asher when Joshua led the tribes across the Jordan into the Promised Land (Joshua 19:28-9). But the Israelites were not able to overcome the tribes that lived there and were therefore not able to enter into Tyre or Sidon. I love what William Barclay said about that in his commentary,

“where the might of arms was helpless, the conquering love of Jesus Christ was victorious. The earthly Israel had failed to gather in the people of Phoenicia; now the true Israel had come upon them. It was not a strange land into which Jesus came; it was a land which long ago God had given Him for His own. He was not so much coming amongst strangers as He was entering into His inheritance”



William Barclay

The story uses the metaphors of children, children's bread, and dogs, which according to some commentaries, was the way Jesus tested the woman's faith and revealed her strong confidence in Jesus' power to heal her daughter. She saw Jesus as "Lord" and received her miracle.

And the healing of the deaf mute man was a clear fulfilment of the prophecy in Isaiah 35 - "Be strong, do not fear; your God will come, he will come with vengeance, with divine retribution he will come to save you.' Then will the eyes of the blind be opened and the ears of the deaf unstopped. Then will the lame leap like a deer, and the mute tongue shout for joy."

It's interesting to note that it was a commonly held belief in the Jewish culture of Jesus' time, that the saliva of firstborn sons was considered to have the power to heal infirmities. Yet on the contrary, according to the Jewish law, saliva was to be considered as unclean as any excrement.

Certainly the Bible relates the use of saliva in a negative sense. Job was mocked, insulted and spat upon. Jesus was mocked, insulted and spat upon (Luke 18:32 for example). Yet here in this encounter with a deaf mute, Jesus uses unclean saliva to bring healing. Even his saliva can heal.

One thing is sure from this Scripture - Everything Jesus does is wonderful! That was the assessment of the crowds after the man was healed - everything he does is wonderful! They couldn't stop talking about Jesus after what they'd seen him do.

Willie Barclay talks about this verse in his commentary on Mark. He says that the declaration that he had done all things well was none other than the verdict of God upon his own creation in the very beginning, quoting Genesis 1:31 - God saw all that he had made, and it was very good.

He goes on to say, *“when Jesus came, bringing healing to men’s bodies and salvation to their souls. He had begun the work of creation all over again. In the beginning everything had been good; man’s sin had spoiled it all; and now Jesus was bringing back the beauty of God to the world which man’s sin had rendered ugly.”*

Everything he does is wonderful! That can be translated as everything he does is beautiful or perfect.

And God is so in love with his creatures that he wants them to share in his glory, and so he comes, as Messiah, to help us.

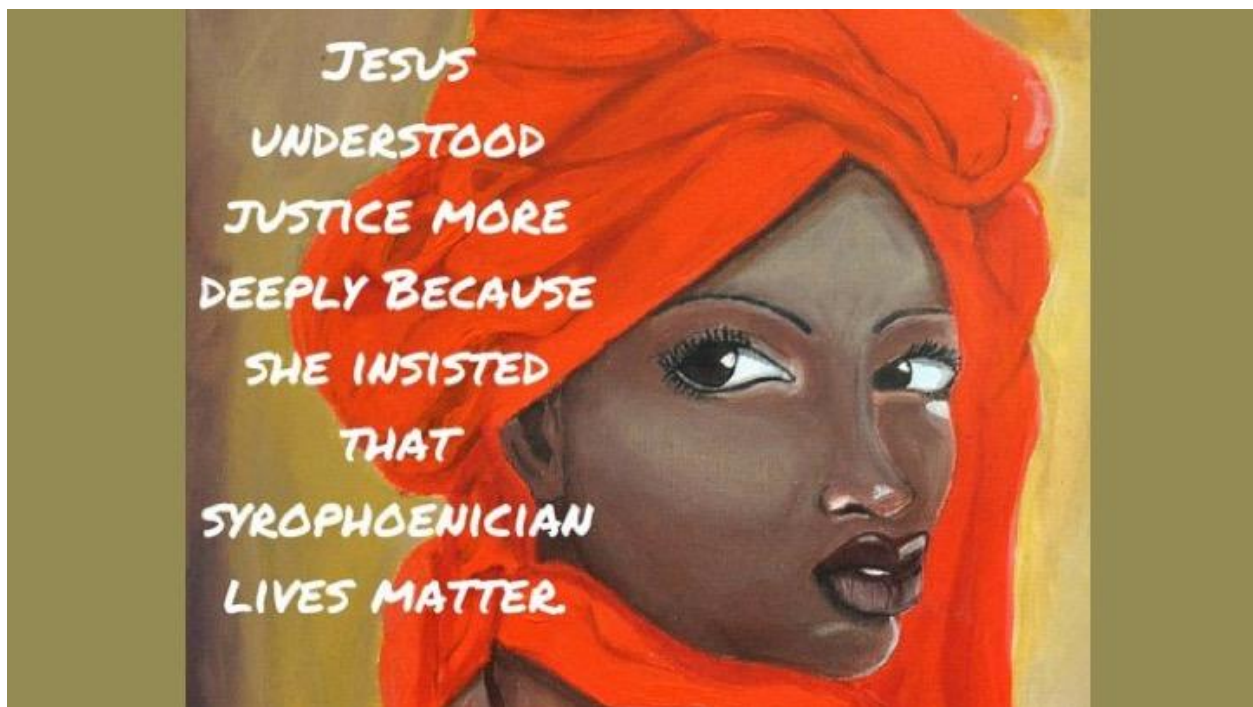
He comes them to partner with ordinary people like you and me, to bring wonderful and beautiful things to make this world perfectly wonderful and beautiful.

He comes to us, to make our homes wonderful places. He comes to make our workplaces, places where beautiful things happen. He comes to make the church a place where wonderful and beautiful things happen in people's lives.

One thing that has struck me in reading this story again is the place of hope transforming the situation. Jesus' encounter with the Syro-Phoenician woman, who was desperate on behalf of her daughter's wellbeing, and who was prepared to take a great risk out of love for her, opened up to Jesus, a new understanding of God's love for others.

In the past, I've tended to read this story through the eyes of Jesus already loving everyone but I wonder if he hadn't yet fully discovered the Father's

love for Gentiles until this point in the Gospels, until this foreign woman surprised him with her faith.



So, if that's correct that Jesus' mind was able to be expanded with a wider understanding of the Father's love, then it made me think, what encounters do I need to have with other people who are not like me, so that I also might be transformed in my thinking into a greater vision of God's love for all?

I'm asking myself, who are the foreigners that I'm not yet engaging with? Who are the people the church needs to meet? Where are they? Are they in my workplace? Are they in my neighbourhood, maybe even next door? Are they the random people I might meet out and about? Are they members of my own family?

And thinking about what we read in the letter of James, what practical steps can I take in order to put my faith into practise? How can I demonstrate love in action, like Jesus did?

James tells us that faith without works is useless. There's no point saying 'God bless you' to someone who doesn't have enough to eat or enough clothing. And it's wrong to show preference to the rich and ignore the needs of the poor amongst us.

One of the reasons James says this is because he tells us that God has chosen the **poor to be rich in faith**. That means if we ignore the poor then we risk not encountering the riches of God. I think we must have encounters with poor people in order to have our minds opened up to a greater vision of God's love.

I remember in **Tanzania** being struck by this idea when living with some very poor Christians who wouldn't do anything without first praying about it. They taught me so much about faith. And they were so generous with the little they had by way of provisions. But they were so rich in faith.

So why don't we be **alert this week** to the potential for ordinary everyday encounters to open up to us a new depth to the Father's love for all people? Let's give our consent to the Spirit of God to open up our hearts and minds in the way Jesus opened up the deaf ears and freed the mute tongue. And let's be willing to ask the Lord to show us **what small steps** we can take, to put our faith into practise. And let's see the continuation, in Christ, of Christ doing all things well, until this world is filled with the glory of God's inexhaustible love.