

Mark 7 24 to 30 The Syrophenician Woman's Faith

Also Matthew 15:27 The Canaanite Woman's Faith

24 From there he set out and went away to the region of Tyre.[a] He entered a house and did not want anyone to know he was there. Yet he could not escape notice, 25 but a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit immediately heard about him, and she came and bowed down at his feet. 26 Now the woman was a Gentile, of Syrophenician origin. She begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter. 27 He said 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." 28 But she answered him, "Sir,[b] even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." 29 Then he said to her, "For saying that, you may go—the demon has left your daughter." 30 So she went home, found the child lying on the bed, and the demon gone.

Context:

Jesus is a radical. For instance, Chapter 7 opens with Jesus being challenged by the Pharisees and scribes for breaking with prevailing religious notions of purity: some of his disciples did not ritually wash their hands before a meal. This meant they impure and defiling what they ate.

Jesus rejects empty long-standing customs and labels the elders hypocrites who worship god with their lips and yet the heart of far away. He breaks with tradition and tells the crowd's: there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile.

Jesus the rule breaker and the rule re-maker

Following this hostile encounter and others with sceptical and unbelieving religious leaders and elders Christ clearly feels the need to 'get away' and be alone and so leaves rural Galilee for distant Phoenicia (now Lebanon). He arrives at the gentile dominated city of Tyre and enters a house seeking isolation and anonymity. Such hopes of contemplative withdrawal prove to be in vain for he is, what word can we use, **accosted** by a desperate individual, assertive not herself but for her distraught daughter in distress. She begs Jesus to cast the demon out of her daughter.

Now as Professor Elisabeth Johnson notes, in engaging directly with Jesus she breaks three important cultural taboos of the time

- She is of Syro-Phoenician origin and so a Gentile and living her life outside the law of Moses and so implicitly impure. Jews and gentiles do not mix
- she is a woman unaccompanied by a male. What sort of woman risks such scandal?

- She, a woman, **initiates a conversation** with a strange man. What sort of shameless woman does that?

So, any self-respecting first century Jew would be scandalised by the actions of an assertive solo foreign female starting a conversation with man – she shows no respect for patriarchal structures or traditional centuries old customs.

And in a sense neither does Jesus by choosing to engage in dialogue with her

Our Syro-Phoenician rule breaker begs Jesus to cast the demon out of her daughter. But, to our surprise if not shock, Jesus demurs saying: “Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.” To our ears his reply comparing children (the privileged position of Israel) and with dogs (less privileged Gentiles) is at best problematic and at worse rude or even racist

So this response makes for awkward reading as it is so atypical and unexpected behaviour from the compassionate Jesus. Does Jesus ever decline in other gospel stories such a direct request for healing. Why this lack of spontaneous generosity?

Three Interpretations

What are we to make of it? May I offer three interpretations

One interpretation is that Jesus is saying **I must prioritise my immediate mission to bring salvation to the Jews and avoid mission creep**. Jesus rightly says no because the time for addressing the needs of gentiles is not right. His immediate mission is to the Jews; later would come the Gentiles' turn. A yes but not yet?

Other interpretations: Professor Matt Skinner writes: “Every interpreter must make at least one key decision about this story: Is the woman **passing a test** or **winning an argument?**”

The woman is being tested. The reason argumentative emails generate more heat than light is that a recipient of the message has no idea of the tone of voice or smiling/unsmiling facial signals are combined to communicate. What if “Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.” Is said with a light lilt in the voice and a smile with playful glint in the eye. In this interpretation Jesus is jesting and testing; he is giving women a chance to express faith with Jesus already knowing she has that faith before he gladly heals the daughter

Or does she win the argument: How many of us take no for an answer when our loved one's wellbeing is at risk? Not this Syro-Phoenician female, on behalf of her daughter. She is not arguing for equality of status. She shows the humility to accept her place in the queue behind the Jews - the chosen people of God. Moreover, she convincingly argues there is more than enough food to go around for Jew and gentile alike; she persuasively argues that the discarded crumbs of the children (Israelites) are more than enough to feed her gentile daughter's needs. She refuses to believe her gender and her race automatically exclude her from God's grace.

Clearly Jesus warms to the woman's reply. "29 Then he said to her, "For saying that, you may go —the demon has left your daughter." And note this is the only instance of healing at a distance found in Mark's gospel

Implications

The Syrophenician Woman's Faith expands our understanding of what it means to be in relationship with God.

I have said before that I am deeply attracted by the CoE central doctrine taught to us when training to be a Lay Minister

Our understanding of Christianity is founded on the triad of Scripture, tradition and reason

If the Syro-Phoenician female, had relied solely on tradition, the conversation might never have taken place.

She uses reason to engage in relationship. To petition for right thing.

We can learn a lot about persistence paying off for today's gospel reading. Amen