

Sermon in St Augustine's Sunday 5 September 2015

Mark 7: Verses 24-End

It is a joy to be back at St Augustine's, a most appropriately named church for today's gospel reading since both the stories in it are about grace and Augustine is often known as "the Doctor of Grace".

Yet these two stories have more dimensions to them than simply Grace.

- The timing of Grace,
- The generosity of Grace
- The humility of grace;
- And the puzzles of grace

Are all woven into these passages.

Now the puzzles are difficult, so much so that some preachers and churches tend to avoid these sections of Mark's Gospel.

For example Year B of the Roman Catholic Lectionary deliberately leaves out the first story of the Syro-Phoenician Woman from its Sunday Gospel Readings presumably because of someone's misguided view that the interpretation of it is too challenging.

But sometimes difficult puzzles can be the most rewarding. So let's go to the text at verses 24-25. They tell us that Jesus entered a house near to the predominantly Gentile city of Tyre wishing to hide himself from the massive crowds who had been following him. The implication is that he needed some time alone for rest and reflection.

But he didn't get it. Because a woman who had heard about Jesus sought him out and made a passionate plea for him to cure her mentally ill daughter.

Mark wants his readers to know that there were three strikes against this unknown woman which to the Jews made her an outsider if not an outcast - her gender, her religion and her nationality.

To put this in its historical context John Stott tells us that in those times a devout Jew would regularly give thanks in his daily prayers that he was not a woman and not a Gentile.

This lady was beyond the pale on both counts.

As a Greek she was in the wrong religion as a non-Jew.

As a woman her sex made her second class citizen.

As a Gentile born in Syrian Phoenicia she had wandered far from home.

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One might ask if in today's world she would be termed 'a migrant'.

Yet despite all these disadvantages the woman found Jesus, falling at his feet and begging him to heal her demon-possessed daughter.

So far, this story sounds as though it might be going to fall into the familiar pattern of Jesus's healing ministry as related by Mark.

But in the next two verses it takes a puzzling turn when Jesus seems to respond rather dismissively and with unexpected bluntness to the woman's entreaty.

Verse 27:

"First let the children eat all they want" he told her "for it is not right to take the children's bread and toss it to the dogs"

Now that verse really puts the cat among the theologians.

Some of them say that Jesus is being harsh or even rude because he seems to reject her in language about tossing bread "to their dogs" which in a wrong tone could sound insulting.

Tom Wright tries to overcome this difficulty by saying that Jesus is engaging in "teasing banter".

Some feminist Bible commentators go so far as to claim that the Syro-Phoenician lady is a sort of first century Germaine Greer, who demonstrates how a strong minded and articulate woman of determination could get the better of Jesus in a no-holds barred argument.

But hang on a minute. While modern theologians bicker, banter or feminise among themselves, let's focus, as Augustine surely would have done, on scripture and faith- in his language *sola scriptura and sola fide*.

Although the word faith does not actually appear in Mark's account of this encounter it is prominent in Matthew's version of the story which we will come to in a moment.

Far from rebuffing the woman in his first exchange with her, Jesus is actually making a subtle point about the timing of his grace when he responds:

"First let the children eat all they want...."

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What he is hinting here is that the priority of his ministry at this stage is to reach out to the Jews, the children of Israel.

But the Syro-Phoenician Woman takes him up on the word **first** and comes back strongly saying in today's parlance: "What about us Gentiles? We may be below the table, or as they would say at Downton Abbey "below the salt" or "below stairs", but surely Jesus we too can be given a few crumbs of your grace".

Jesus listens to the woman and responds both generously and humbly saying in Matthew's version of the story: (Matthew 15:28) "Woman you have great faith, your request is granted".

So clearly it was the woman's faith which justified the gift of grace which Jesus bestowed on her.

It was a gift which would later be extended to all Gentiles through the ministry of Paul the Apostle.

The Syro-Phoenician Woman was almost the first Gentile to receive this gift. She was the harbinger of the Christian ministry to all non- Jews, a ministry which eventually brought Gentiles from Europe, Asia, China, Africa and the world into receiving God's Grace. We would not be here today in our largely Gentile Church of England without this wonderful gift.

The first sign that this miracle might be going to happen started with the faith of a complete outsider with three strikes against her - the Syro-Phoenician Woman.

So what a powerful story this is! Understanding it is not really difficult, but it is amazing, the first recorded example of the coming global reach and range of Jesus's amazing grace.

But grace needs to be recognised, demonstrated and is sometimes miraculously granted. This brings us to the second story in our reading about the healing of the deaf and mute man.

This is at first glance a rather more traditional Jesus healing story. He has travelled far from Tyre towards the sea of Galilee. He is still at an early stage of his ministry.

He doesn't yet want people to know he is the Messiah fulfilling the prophecy of Isaiah 35: 5-6 "*Then will the ears of the deaf be unstopped ... and the mute tongue shout for joy*".

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So even though he's doing exactly that in this story, which must have made some of his followers put two and two together and link him with ancient Messianic prophecies, nevertheless Jesus ask them not to tell anyone. So again we see here a point about the timing of grace.

However, as even Jesus discovered, you can't keep the good news quiet.

There is a mysterious word in the middle of this story when Jesus is healing the man. He says with a deep sigh "EPHPHATHA".

It is an Aramaic word meaning "Be opened" which strikes a chord with me for linguistic and personal reasons.

About 5 years ago before the civil war began I visited Syria and travelled to a remote mountainous village called Maloula. It was one of the last Aramaic speaking communities.

I went to the local church and listened to the Lord's prayer and other prayers spoken in the Aramaic language Jesus used every day, as the villages took the bread and wine as they had been doing for almost 2,000 years and as we will be doing in a few minutes time.

It was a moving experience whose memory is made all the more poignant by the knowledge that Maloula has since been razed to the ground by the repeated bombings and shellings of the war.

That Aramaic word "Be opened" is not limited to the opening of ears or the loosening of tongues.

It might in the context of today mean open our hearts and our generosity of grace to an appropriate number of Syrian refugees from Maloula or any other ruined community in that country.

Or it might mean "Be opened" in the context of an Alpha course goer opening his or her whole person and heart to the Holy Spirit.

Or it might still apply to the 21st century healings of people with speech and hearing impairment.

Let me end with a story on this last theme.

After coming out of prison I spent three of the happiest years of my life at the only institution in Britain which had worse food and worse plumbing than a prison. This was Wycliffe Hall, Oxford, an Anglican theology college which was the alma mater of Nicky Gumbel and many others.

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When I was reading theology there, about 75 Anglican ordinands were my fellow students.

Virtually all of them were hoping to become Vicars with churches and parishes. But there was one student who much though we liked him, we all knew simply couldn't lead a congregation.

This was because he had a very serious speech impediment. He couldn't even start the Lord's prayer without getting stuck for what seemed like an eternity on Our F-F-F

So I and everyone else imagined that this ordinand whose name was Andrew Thomson would find his vocation in some back room administrative role in the church. Because with his stammer he could not possibly be leading public worship in front line church ministry as a Vicar. Or so we thought. God had other ideas.

A decade or more rolled by and then a couple of years ago I went out to Abu Dhabi in the UAE to visit my son who was living there.

And my son said one Sunday evening, would you like to come to the English church. By the way the Vicar says he knows you.

As my son typically couldn't remember the Vicar's name I was none the wiser.

When I got down to the church I met the proud vicar – none other than Andrew Thomson, who came out to explain with barely a stammer – that his church was now getting such big congregations with standing room only that it was having to expand from 300 seats to 800 seats. The building works for this massive expansion were well under way.

And then he added, "I wish you'd been here last Sunday for our Carol Service. We had to hold it out of doors because we had well over 2,000 people".

And I said, "Andrew this is amazing. Of all our contemporaries at Wycliffe you obviously have grown the biggest church of all. 800 worshippers on Sundays and 2,000 at your Carol Service. However did you do it?!"

And Andrew replied, "By prayer of course. You remember we were in the same prayer group at Wycliffe".

Well I did indeed remember that although my main memory was of Andrew not being able to stammer out the first *F* of Our Father.

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Sometimes, I have wondered ever since, what prayer Andrew prayed that cured his stammer and empowered him to build one of the biggest churches in the Anglican communion.

A good bet would be that he might have prayed the prayer or a variation of the prayer was heard in the first reading today of Nehemiah.

"O Lord be attentive to the prayer of this your servant and to the prayer of your servants who delight in revering your name".

(Nehemiah 1:11)

That's a great prayer to end on for all of us who delight in revering God's name at St Augustine's this morning. For our faith tells us that Jesus is always attentive to our prayers.

Whether we have needs as desperate as those of the Syro-phoenician woman or whether we have far more mundane prayer requests for our families and friends and our own struggles.

The God of all grace always responds – not always with the timing or in the precise way we expect but in the end we will find that our puzzles have solutions.

May we too, like the people at the end of our gospel reading, find that we are "overwhelmed with amazement and say with gratitude of Jesus "He has done everything well". Amen.