

# NORTH BALWYN UNITING CHURCH

## Bread for the dogs

Isaiah 35: 1 – 7, Mark 7: 24 – 37

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In the story about the Syro-Phoenician woman we find a major turning point in the story of Jesus' journey as the gospel describes it. It is positioned about halfway through the gospel, in between the stories of the feeding of the five thousand and the feeding of the four thousand.

Seven chapters ago the gospel has started with an announcement indicating to the reader what he or she is about to launch into: "The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God." Another seven chapters on the gospel will finish with the story of the resurrection and three terrified women fleeing from the tomb after they have been told to return to Galilee, where everything began, to meet the risen Lord.

In the first seven chapters we see Jesus travelling through Galilee, achieving fame as rabbi, healer, miracle worker and teacher. The people around him are not quite sure what to make of him and especially his disciples, in spite of being close to him, don't seem to understand who Jesus is and what his ministry is about.

What has been revealed to the reader at the start, namely that this Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, is, by the time we get half way through the book, still a mystery to those around him.

Only demons and evil spirits have spoken the truth about Jesus so far, all the others have wondered, guessed and jumped to conclusions: Is he the reincarnation of John the Baptist? of Elia? of Elisha? Is he mad, or possessed by Beelzebub perhaps and therefore able to drive out evil Spirits? Why else would the son of a carpenter from Nazareth be able to come up with such extraordinary words and deeds?

By the time we get to chapter 6 verse 30 the mystery has deepened to such an extent that even the reader, who has the advantage of the clue in that all important first sentence of the book: “the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God” will, by now, be thoroughly confused. Jesus performs miracles, but tells those who witness them or benefit from them to keep quiet. Jesus drives out demons, but again he beseeches those who are the subject of his exorcisms to keep them a secret. He preaches a good sermon in his home village, but proves to be totally ineffective when it comes to working miracles there. He teaches with a deep wisdom that seems totally disproportionate to his humble origins, he enters into debate with scribes and Pharisees as if he is their equal, but at the same time seems to prefer simple fishermen and ordinary people to share his teachings with.

Who is this man? The question seems to resound through every page of the first part of Mark’s gospel.

With the feeding of the four and five thousand we then move into the next phase of Jesus ministry. We start to move out of Galilee, and head, via a long and rather strange detour through the heart of gentile country, to Jerusalem.

Tension has been building between Jesus and his enemies and it is becoming clearer and clearer to the reader that a plot is being hatched by the scribes and Pharisees to assassinate Jesus as soon as he gets to Jerusalem. As readers we are not sure if Jesus or his disciples are aware of this, but it seems likely they have at least an inkling of the danger that is looming on the horizon.

It is in this context that Jesus has his encounter with the Syro-Phoenician woman. Under the cloud of the growing opposition to his ministry by the leaders of his people, in between two miraculous feedings, just after a debate with his opponents about cleanliness and just before the story of the healing of the deaf and mute man.

The encounter takes place in Tyre, one of two gentile cities that figure as the most gentile of gentile cities (the other being Sidon) in the prophets. Emphasising the fact that Jesus is out of his comfort

zone here: Away from home, amongst strangers, in and amongst another culture.

Several different layers of story seriously start to interact with each other here and it may not be easy to keep a grasp on everything that is going on, both on and underneath the surface. But bear with me, because all of this is important to understand what happens in this encounter and why it is so important.

There is one more important element which has bearing on the story of the Syro-Phoenician woman I think deserves our attention: bread, and the grain it is made from.

In chapter four Jesus talks extensively about seed and the grain growing from it. How the seed is scattered and sprouts regardless of the sower being aware of it and bearing fruit, thirty, sixty or even hundred times. Of course the reader knows Jesus is not only referring to the growth of the Kingdom of God when he is referring to the seed, he is also referring to himself. If we and those around him are aware of it or not, his life story is developing into a direction where he himself will prove to be the seed that is sown, the grain bearing fruit, the bread that will be broken.

In Chapter six five thousand people are fed, with only a few loaves and two fish, leaving twelve baskets of broken pieces of bread after the assembled crowd has been satisfied. Hopefully we, the readers, who are familiar with that first sentence at the beginning of the gospel and read the story with the benefit of hindsight after the resurrection, will get the reference to the last supper, to the Eucharist, and the wordplay on the name "Ichtyos", fish, which in the early Church was used as an acronym for Iesus Christus theos yios, Jesus Christ, Son of God. Five thousand celebrate communion, sharing bread handed out by Jesus, the Ichtyos, the fish man, with enough left for every tribe of God's people, Israel.

In Chapter eight we read about a very similar event, this time four thousand are fed, on a couple of loaves and some small fish, and again plenty is left. This time the gospel writer's play with words and numbers indicate that Jesus is celebrating communion again, but

that his audience has broadened itself out to include the Jews as well as gentiles. Something has changed.

It is in between, in chapter seven where we find the Syro-Phoenician woman asking, demanding, the leftovers of the bread of the family meal, for her and her daughter. She convinces Jesus that he should give her of what is left after the children have had enough.

And again, there is more going on here than meets the eye. The way Mark narrates the story is incredibly clever. This Syro-Phoenician woman is one of the wealthy upper crust of Tyre, part of a community of Greek speaking wealthy expats who were able to afford food the poor could not. Worse: when the crop failed they would buy the little there was, leaving the local Jewish people to starve in the streets. It is pure irony that she comes begging for crumbs from under the table of a Jewish rabbi! Jews referred to gentiles in general as dogs, but this woman is more than just a gentile dog, she is of an unpleasant, unfriendly breed.

“Let the children eat first all they want, for it is not right to take the children’s bread and toss it to the dogs”.

Jesus is rude here, churlish, to a woman in distress who left her sick little girl at home to seek his help. Why Jesus? How do we reconcile this with our image of you as the meek and mild, loving, caring Lord?

This is the first and only time in the gospel of Mark Jesus is addressed by anyone with the title Lord. In spite of being a “dog”, after all the confusion in previous chapters, somehow this woman gets to the heart of who Jesus is in two seconds flat with her question. After all the wondering, wild guesses and confusion of the last seven chapters, it is this woman who cuts to the bone and what, in a way, will prove to be the heart of his calling: “Lord, but even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs”.

She is the first and only person to call Jesus “Lord” in this gospel and recognise him for what he is. She is also the only person who enters into a debate with him and makes him change his mind.

Jesus does not want to help this woman, she does not fit the ministry profile he believes to be his. He doesn't want to see her, he doesn't want to help her, he doesn't want to give her what he feels is not hers. The way Mark tells it, in the Syro-Phoenician woman Jesus comes up against his boundaries, against someone he does not consider to be part of his ministry focus, does not see as someone he has come to serve.

And what does she do? She reflects his own gospel back to him: "Come on Jesus, with all that left over bread you can't now say there are no crumbs under the table!"

Jesus' ears are opened to her plea and he manages to get his tongue around speaking words of grace and release to this woman. Again there is irony in the way the story is presented: In Tyre's twin city Sidon a couple of verses on, Jesus will unstop a deaf man's ears and heal his speech right after his own ears have been unstopped and his own mouth opened.

So here we are: Jesus Christ, son of God, seed of the Kingdom of God, waiting to be sown in the dark earth to bear fruit hundred fold or more, bread of life, to be broken for us, miracle worker, healer, rabbi, teacher, on gentile soil, far away from home, put to rights by a woman he, or anybody else, would have seen as part of the community he has come to serve.

Lord! What nobody has understood so far, and nobody will until the very end of the gospel, she understands: It is the Lord who is standing in front of her here and on the basis of that she demands his grace: "The crumbs from under the table".

It is no coincidence we find the story of the deaf and mute man immediately after the story of the Syro-Phoenician woman. In it we find a straight and very clear reference to Isaiah 35 where it says the emergence of the Kingdom of God will be marked by the unstopping of deaf ears and the loosening of unwilling tongues. Not only the man is healed here, Jesus himself is healed and comes to a deeper understanding of the prophecy he is fulfilling. Isaiah 35 adds to the prophecy about the healing of the sick and the strengthening of the weak, the healing of the world, yes even to the

whole of creation, so nothing, not even the parched soil of the desert or the haunt of the jackal is excluded.

Mark describes a learning Jesus, a transforming Jesus. A Jesus that had to learn that not only the weak hands need strengthening and the feeble knees firming up, that not only the eyes of the blind need to be opened and the ears of the deaf unstopped, but that he himself needs his eyes opened to the fact that his call, his ministry, has no bounds, but is for all creation. Including the dogs.

The question resounding through the gospel (who is this man?) is another step closer to being resolved: Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, greater than John, Elia and Elisha put together, and at the same time he is a human being, growing into his call and his ministry, churlish and reluctant to share with some he considers to be dogs. A man who repents his initial, ingrained, narrow mindedness and overcomes class and ethnic prejudice in order to open up horizons in his ministry nobody would ever have dreamed of, open to transformation even through people he had every reason not to expect anything from. That is what makes him the true Messiah says Mark, the Christ, the Son of God. Open to the unexpected whisperings of the Spirit, obedient, and ready and able to change direction when needed.

What does it mean for us if the ability to change and transform was part of what made Jesus, Christ? That he had his boundaries stretched and his views broadened to include people he had, until then, assumed were not to share in the abundance of all those baskets of leftover grace? Isn't that wonderful comfort and encouragement? If even Jesus needed time and a good talking to before he understood just how far God wanted him to go?

This shift in Jesus' view of himself and his ministry has meant that you and me are now part of the body of Christ. Gentile dogs, wealthy, and no part of the poor peasant Jews in Galilee he initially focussed his ministry on. Who knows, without the audacity of the Syro-Phoenician woman challenging Jesus' preconceptions about himself and about her, we might still have been outsiders. That's what Mark tells us anyway.

There is another thing this story teaches us. In it we catch a glimpse, a foreshadowing of what Easter will bring. The resurrection message that seed needs to die before it will bear fruit a hundred fold or more. That serious outreach to the world only happens if we open ourselves to being changed by our encounter with it and truly give of ourselves. That we need to learn to trust that if we die to ourselves, our preconceptions, our traditions, the boundaries of what we believe to be right and proper, of who is in and who is out, and allow ourselves to be transformed and changed, that new horizons will open, the perspective of the good news broaden, the love of God prove even wider and more inclusive than we thought before. That true healing and redemption only occur where the seed dies to its self and grows into giving of itself without restraint or caution.

Not only are we called to extend our ministry to the whole creation, and include even those who we have serious trouble accepting as entitled to God's grace. We are called to empty ourselves of every false sense of security and self importance and put our trust in God alone. We are called to stop panicking about what the future may or may not bring, and open our ears to hear the truth about ourselves and God's will for us. We are called to be transformed into people who, like Jesus, are able to make a real difference in the world because they don't worry about what may happen in three days time, but trust that it will be new, exciting and better than what was before. Trust that there will be plenty more to share from, if we share some more. Trust that what today may seem to be beyond hope, will burst the boundaries of its grave tomorrow. Trust what we cannot conceive or imagine is already being prepared by the loving perseverance of our God.

For people who live like that there is no need to keep countless baskets of left over grace in case we need them. For people who live like that there is only giving, and giving more, never counting the cost, without fear and without restriction. Trusting that when we do our bit, we will find God beside us, transforming and stretching us into an existence that brings healing and wholeness to the world. Amen.