

Today we keep going with a combination of the Mark (though just the first part) and James readings and I will make a few references to Season of Creation and today's specific weekly theme of Humanity. First to the gospel.

There are two aspects where we feel uncomfortable in this incident. First, Jesus initially refuses to heal the woman's daughter, and secondly he justifies it with what seems to be a searing racially based insult. Sounds a bit like he is using race as the basis for deciding who gets health care. That is a bit like a person turning up at a church or public hospital and being turned away because they were not the right race – i.e. Australian.

It's worth noting that this woman took the same position as Jairus did when he sought Jesus' assistance with his daughter ([Mk. 5:22](#)). However, he was Jewish and male, and she was a woman and Gentile. Jesus' response to her is very different from his response to her.

The role of women in environmental leadership is very important. Women are often more impacted by climate change than men. In many countries women are having to walk further and further distances to fetch water and firewood, reducing their opportunities for education and paid work. Women are more likely to be smallholder farmers who are dependant on rain fall rather than irrigation. And women are more likely to die in climate related disasters – carrying children and the elderly they are less able to flee.

And yet women are also earth keepers and protectors – biodiversity is a source of food and healing. They will also fight for the health of their children in the face of environmental degradation.

Some commentators and preachers who cannot bear the thought that Jesus may actually have likened this woman to a dog in his comparison try to soften his comment by saying he was just testing the woman's faith, or point out, quite accurately, that the word he used for "dog" is a diminutive, that is the equivalent of "little dog" i.e. puppy rather than dog. So, maybe we have to allow that it could be the difference between being called not "you bitch" but questionably more acceptable, "you little bitch"... hmmm. Some say Jesus was just testing her and always knew he would deliver on her request. One commentary suggests Jesus winked at the woman when he made his comment about dogs, or doggies.

Show slide of ancient Israel

One thing many of us have never really come to terms with is that , our salvation, the very radical inclusivity of the gospel of Jesus Christ that has found us and redeemed us originates in and is dependent upon God's particular election of Israel and the particular incarnation of Jesus of Nazareth. It is all very Jewish – in the gospels and especially in passages like this one today we are repeatedly presented with Jesus' Jewishness. When terms like *Messiah. King of the Jews, Son of David* are used of Jesus, we can keep them

at a high enough level of abstraction that they need not disrupt our settled, complacent gentile Christian identities. Jesus understood his mission as first of all to his own people. His initial calling and commitment was to be ushering in the Reign of God and that started with Israel - who of course were called to be alight to the Nations true but that was by extension; an outflowing of the salvation promised. That is Jesus understanding that he approaches this interaction.

“the Gentile woman requests a cure outside the context of Jesus’ call to Israel; she seems to be asking for a cure which is detached from the in-breaking of God’s kingdom, merely taking advantage of the opportunity provided by the presence of a miracle worker. This is perhaps the reason for Jesus’ stern answer; his healings are part of something greater and cannot be torn out of that context.

Nevertheless when God’s election of Israel becomes the basis for Jesus’ initial refusal to heal this girl, we cannot avoid feeling indignant. At least one of the things that is going on in today’s reading is that Jesus, a Jew, calling his own people to return to the vision of the wholeness of the God of all creation is confronted with the scary notion it is so easy to slide from the notion of the chosen people ( to be a light to the nations ) to asking Who is not the chosen people but the unchosen people and then only a small step to saying who is the rejected.

“Sir,” she pleaded, “Even the dogs under the table eat the children’s left overs!” This woman is not only stubbornly persistent; she’s smart. She’s turned Jesus’ argument back on itself. He had appealed to the rules of good parenting to show why he shouldn’t have anything to do with her or her request, and she has shown that it is because she is a good parent that she is continuing to ask. I’m only asking to lick the plate clean after your children have finished she argues. No-one loses out just because the blessing is extended.



And to the astonishment of the Jews present, Jesus concedes the argument. Nothing could be more publicly humiliating than for a respected Jewish rabbi to concede an argument to a pagan woman. No-one would have expected him to even listen to her argument, let alone concede it. The only right response he could make was to have her dragged from the room, and then wash his hands and purify himself.

But something has happened in Jesus. Something has broken through his defence and enabled him to see the world in a new light. Gently he lifts her to

her feet and says, "For that answer, go in peace. Go back home, and you will find your daughter made whole again." So she went home and it was as Jesus said. Jesus definitely moved in his stance and opinion on this matter. He grew.

I recall the staff member who assisted at the communion in a nursing home in Sunshine when I was there. I asked the question, "What do we know about James? Anything else than he was the younger brother of Jesus?. Out of the corner of my eye I saw the staff member's head snap up. She sought me out after the service. "A brother of Jesus you say? I have never heard this before". "Yes, Jesus had siblings... brothers and sisters.. according to two of the gospels". I replied.

She was surprised I think because she had in her mind probably what was a sentimentalised image of Jesus. She could not think of him as a normal baby, soiling his nappies, being toilet trained, squabbling with his siblings, crying when he grazed his knee, making mistakes and being disciplined, learning valuable lessons in life. Well unless we are going to hold to the notion that Jesus even as a one day old baby was fully formed we need to agree with all those propositions. That for me is encouraging and helpful rather than scandalous. Jesus learned stuff and grew physically, emotionally, spiritually, just like I have to. And here we have an account of Jesus growing, his world expanding. It is not as if God is not portrayed as changing God's mind in scripture; and what is intercessory prayer but asking God to act in a way that God has not already acted?

The Syro-Phoenician woman understands that God's election of Israel entails Jesus' feeding of the children of Abraham. She does not argue with the fairness of God's choice. Rather, as if she had studied the Hebrew Scriptures, she recognizes that such an abundant overflowing of grace must result in "all the nations being blessed." Instead of fighting God's choice, she attends to its importance. Her faith and her wit enable her to fit herself and her daughter into this choice -- with miraculous results.

The placing alongside each other of James and Mark in our lectionary this week reveals an unexpectedly wicked sense of humour on the part of the normally staid committee responsible for putting our lectionary together. The passage in James begins with an assertion of the fundamental incompatibility of faith in Christ, with partiality in human relations. It then goes on to list a variety of ways in which believers might typically display such favouritism. In Mark, Jesus seems to engage in just the sort of activity that James warns against, refusing to heal a very sick child because she and her mother are not Jewish.

We have to be honest enough to confess our Christian churches are probably just as much suckers for this partially as most other groups in our community. James challenges us: How come you are still more ready to welcome some people into your gatherings than others? We perhaps avoid the crassness of ushers at the front door of the church building enquiring as they hand out the

news-sheet “Gold rings? Those with gold rings down the front to the reserved seats.”

What might James say to us? “How come you show a warmer and more enthusiastic welcome to that educated, employed, tolerant, socially aware, piano playing, family with children, than you do to that awkward unemployed bloke with the heavy accent”?

“I was hungry, and you formed a humanities group to discuss my hunger. I was imprisoned, and you crept off to your chapel and prayed for my release. I was naked, and in your mind you debate the morality of my appearance. I was sick, and you knelt and thanked God for your health. I was homeless, and you preached to me of the spiritual shelter of the love of God. I was lonely, and you left me alone to pray for me. You seem so holy, so close to God – but I am still very hungry, and lonely, and cold.”

Oh we will all have our subtle differences; it may not always be quite as crass as taxable income earned during the financial year - for some it will be academic qualifications and papers published, for others overseas countries visited, for others how well politically we are connected etc. We each have our cherished hierarchical favourites. Pretty inevitable, part of who we are; our life experiences which has led us to cherish some things/values. Expression above others. The only thing is that we humans are by nature aggressively tribal creatures who use those identifying labels to not just carve out who we are, that is who is my people, my tribe, my family, country, football team etc but to use that to identify who is not me.

And this is essentially what the Gentile woman points out to Jesus. There's plenty of food for everyone; even once all of those recognized as people, as insiders, are fed, there's still food left over for those who aren't even considered human, the outsiders. And they're all eating the same food, we are all beggars on the street of love finding some morsels of nourishment. And it is enough!