

**Sunday 5<sup>th</sup> September 2021**  
**Trinity 14 (B)**

**Liverpool Parish Church**

**OT: Isaiah 35.4-7a**  
**NT: James 1.1-10,14-17**  
**G: Mark 7.24-end**

Do you sometimes predict what other people are about to say on a particular topic? Have you ever sat in a group talking about UK economy or global warming, for example, ticking off the complex ideas we've heard so many times? Occasionally, we are surprised that isn't something I've thought of, or that really motivates me, or that really challenges me. Last Sunday Jesus took on the Pharisees, challenging their traditions and customs, after which he gets out of town into the region of Tyre.

In today's gospel, the Syrophenician woman's life has come to a standstill as her little daughter is possessed with an unclean spirit. Both unnamed. She is a gentile, a woman, and a foreigner. So according to the culture, she's got three strikes against her, and Jesus knows it.

In our church tradition we walk the gospel down the centre aisle among the congregation, and today Fr Crispin proclaimed the gospel, he said the acclamation, "The Gospel of the Lord" and you responded, "Praise to you Lord Jesus Christ." But, as the gospel procession is making its way to the altar, I wonder if someone would have had a first thought, "wait a second- did Jesus refer to the woman as a dog?"

And the short answer to the question is, yes, he did. This is an exceedingly difficult passage because Jesus' response is harsh.

I have puzzled over Jesus' interaction that seems not very Christlike as far as one can see. This is one of those biblical stories where we wish we had more information and more context.

But should we be upset or worried about Jesus' apparently negative initial response to this woman? It is also important to point out that Jesus doesn't tell the woman "No"; instead, he says, "not yet." This section of the scripture is a challenging one because it compels us to envision and re-think all our ideas and beliefs about God's nature and character and who we believe God is.

You can think of other stories from the Bible like his conversation with the Samaritan woman at Jacob's well in John 4 to see that Jesus focuses on the marginalized and wishes to bring health and healing to all, including the most outcast and unclean, but that he does like to engage in a conversation.

Now some people see the woman here as an illustration of persevering in prayer, like the Jesus' parable of the persistent widow and the unjust judge.

Few others see the woman as a kind of feminist hero, who boldly calls out Jesus to take a more inclusive view that sees the specific needs of the poor rather than just caring to a chosen few.

How can she settle for the scraps fallen from the table?

If the best Café in the city had told you that their cakes was reserved for certain people, would you say, "Can I then have few bits, like the dog under the table?" No, certainly not. You'll leave the café.

We don't learn about the woman being overcome with emotions to win an audience with Jesus, but instead, we see her as a model of humility because she rightly approaches Jesus in an appropriate manner. There were differences between these peoples of varying ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and gender. Jesus heals the daughter, but an integral part of her healing is the healing of discrimination and prejudice between people.

And I always think about the scare stories that we hear about refugees from all over the world – about people who are from outside, who are trying to save themselves and save their families, who have a chance at a new life. I think about the ways in which they risk their lives to get away despite the challenges they face. And I think about the reception that they are receiving and how we can support to transform their lives.

Subsequently it seems like there are prejudices and very large differences to talk about in our world today. Our world is as stratified as ever. The economic inconsistency is frequently tied with a mix of other divisions: in gender and sexuality, in ethnic and cultural diversity, and in politics. In our newspapers and on our televisions, we are being told a story of people risking everything so that they can be safe.

After we let go of the whole insider/ outsider perspective, we can speak about the restoration, healing and the freedom that comes with a life in Christ.

The two instances of healing in today's gospel —both among Gentiles, both with mysterious features that reveal Jesus 'responsiveness to the aspects of every unique human situation.

Jesus though in the end did not give scraps to the Syrophenician woman, nor us but himself.

The encounter between Jesus and the woman has entered Anglican liturgy, what's known as the Prayer of Humble Access: "We are not worthy so much as to gather up the crumbs under thy table. But thou art the same lord, whose property is always to have mercy."

The Prayer of Humble Access teaches us to be like the Syrophenician woman trusting in God's mercy. Thankfully for us, God gives us more than we ask for. In today's gospel, Jesus gives the woman more than just a little few crumbs. He restores her daughter's health.

We come to the Eucharist today not because we are good, or we ought to have the good bread of Jesus, but we need it.

The Revd Tabitha Rao