



A sermon preached at St Andrew's Parish Church, Headington

By Rev Tim Howles

Reading: Mark 7.24-37

In our Gospel this morning, we read about two encounters with Jesus. First, it was the Syro-Phoenician woman. And second, it was the deaf and mute man. These two encounters are certainly different. But they are also very beautiful. And they teach us something about how we too can approach Jesus.

Let's look at them in turn.

1. The encounter of Jesus and the Syro-Phoenician woman

The woman in this story is one of my favourite characters in the whole of the Bible. She is quite something, isn't she! And I'm not the only one to think so. Here's what Martin Luther wrote about her:

What a superb and wonderful woman this is. I think of her often when I'm in my study, when I'm out and about, when I'm on my knees in prayer. If I could be half the person she is, I would be content.

So why is this woman so impressive?

Well, I think it's because of her boldness. She goes right up to Jesus and cries out in a loud voice that he must heal her daughter of a terrible sickness. It must have been quite a sight. In fact, in Matthew's account of this story, we learn that the disciples were so taken aback by this woman, they thought her behaviour was so inappropriate, that they tried to stop her: "send her away; she keeps shouting after us" (Matt 15:23). But she persisted. She pleaded with Jesus to listen. And the verb used here is a progressive participle: she continued on and on and on until she got a hearing. She shows incredible boldness.

But look what happens next. Jesus turns to her and says: "it is not right to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs" (v.27).

What on earth does he mean?

We live in a canine-loving society. But in those days, people were not dog-lovers. In fact, the term was an insult (think of Goliath saying to David: “am I a dog that you should come to me with sticks”, 1 Sam 17:43). Dogs were wild, dirty, mangy, dangerous. They were not to be let inside the house.

So is Jesus insulting this woman? No. He’s using this language to draw attention to her status as an outsider. For everyone could see that the person falling at his knees, pleading for help, was a Gentile, not a Jew; she was a pagan, not a God-worshipper; she was a woman, not a man. This was an outsider: a religious outsider; a moral outsider; a gender outsider. And Jesus uses the term “dog” to remind her that, on the surface of things, she does not belong inside the house.

But look how she responds: “yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table” (v.28). And the word she uses for “dog” is not the same one as Jesus uses. It’s the diminutive form: we could say “little dogs” or perhaps “puppies”. She’s saying: *yes, Jesus, I know that outsiders like me don’t deserve to be let in, but I know that at your table there is plenty of food; surely little puppies are allowed to eat what’s left over from the feast.*

And Jesus commends her more than anyone else he has encountered so far in the Gospel. “For this saying you may go your way; the demon has left your daughter” (v.29). And when she got home she discovered that her daughter had been healed that very moment.

The reason this woman is so great is that she accepts her unworthiness, but she demands grace anyway. And that is the model for anyone who wants to become a Christian. None of us deserve to be saved from our sin. None of us deserve to stand before a holy God. To be a Christian is to recognise that and yet still to ask God to do it for us. Not because of our own record, but because of His. And the good news of the Gospel is that, if you turn to Christ in repentance and faith, He will do that for you.

That’s what we think about as we come to communion. In a few moments, before we take the bread and wine, we’ll say together these words:

We do not presume
to come to this your table, merciful Lord,
trusting in our own righteousness,
but in your manifold and great mercies.
We are not worthy
so much as to gather up the crumbs under your table.
But you are the same Lord
whose nature is always to have mercy.

And that is the Gospel. To be a Christian is to know that we cannot stand before God on the basis of our dignity, on the basis of our rights, on the basis of our moral record. We come to God saying: let me join at your table, not on the basis of what I’ve done, but on the basis of Your grace.

That’s what this woman realised. Will we do the same?

Let's move on to the second encounter:

2. The encounter of Jesus with the deaf and mute man

Now, the interaction of Jesus with this man is very different from the first story.

What happens?

First of all, “Jesus takes the man aside from the crowd privately” (v.33). Next, “he put his fingers into his ears, spat and touched his tongue” (v.33). And then, “looking up to heaven, he sighed and said to him: *ephphatha*, which means, *be opened*” (v.34).

What's going on? Jesus is coming into this man's situation and showing a deep identification with him.

- All his life, this man had been a spectacle; people had laughed at him and mocked him. So Jesus takes him away from the crowd.
- All his life, this man had not been able to participate; and yet here Jesus uses a language he can understand, a form of sign language!
- And all his life, this man had been an outcast, shunned by society. But Jesus touches him physically in the most intimate and loving way.

So there's a deep tenderness and sympathy in this encounter.

But there's something even more important to spot.

The word that Mark uses to describe this deaf and mute man is actually a very rare one: it's the Greek word “μουχάλον” (v.32). And it appears in only one other place in Scripture, which is the Greek version of the Old Testament, Isaiah chapter 35. And that's the first reading we had, just the page before in your pewsheets. And by using that word Mark is deliberately drawing our attention to that other text.

In Isaiah 35, we have a prophecy of the time when God himself will come to save his people:

Say to those who are of a fearful heart, ‘Be strong, do not fear! Here is your God. He will come with vengeance, with terrible recompense. He will come and save you.’ Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy. (Is 35:5-6)

So Mark is saying: do you remember that text. Well then, do you see what's happening right in front of you? The deaf hear, the mute is shouting for joy. God Himself has come to save you.

The man in our story recognised that. And it changed his life. For as soon as his tongue was released, it began wagging: he couldn't stop telling people about Jesus and singing praises to God for all He had done for him.

So what does this mean for us?

Christians believe that to have an encounter with Jesus is not to come into the presence of a moral teacher, or a good example, or a inspiring leader. It's to encounter God himself and to be saved, not because of ourselves, but as a gift of grace.

- The story of the woman shows that we can come forward and claim that gift for ourselves. And we can do that boldly. It doesn't matter what your background is. It doesn't matter what you've done in the past. All that matters is that you come to Jesus now. He is powerful enough to heal you.
- And the story of the man shows us what life looks like when we've had that encounter. When we know what Jesus has done for us, is there any other response than to go out of these doors and tell all the world about Him. No matter what it costs. Out of an overflow of joy.

Let me leave you with the words of the beautiful hymn by Charles Wesley, which we'll be singing at the end of the service. It reflects this :

O For a thousand tongues to sing
My dear Redeemer's praise!
The glories of my God and King,
The triumphs of His grace!

Hear him, ye deaf; his praise, ye dumb,
Your loosen'd tongues employ;
Ye blind, behold your Saviour come,
And leap, ye lame, for joy.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Sermon preached on Sunday 09 September 2018, the Fifteenth Sunday of Trinity