**The Syrophoenician Woman’s Faith**

**Mark 24**From there he set out and went away to the region of Tyre.[[a](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Mark%207.24-37&version=NRSVA#fen-NRSVA-24484a)] He entered a house and did not want anyone to know he was there. Yet he could not escape notice, **25**but a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit immediately heard about him, and she came and bowed down at his feet. **26**Now the woman was a Gentile, of Syrophoenician origin. She begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter. **27**He said to her, ‘Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.’ **28**But she answered him, ‘Sir,[[b](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Mark%207.24-37&version=NRSVA#fen-NRSVA-24488b)] even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs.’ **29**Then he said to her, ‘For saying that, you may go—the demon has left your daughter.’ **30**So she went home, found the child lying on the bed, and the demon gone.

**Jesus Cures a Deaf Man**

**31**Then he returned from the region of Tyre, and went by way of Sidon towards the Sea of Galilee, in the region of the Decapolis. **32**They brought to him a deaf man who had an impediment in his speech; and they begged him to lay his hand on him. **33**He took him aside in private, away from the crowd, and put his fingers into his ears, and he spat and touched his tongue. **34**Then looking up to heaven, he sighed and said to him, ‘Ephphatha’, that is, ‘Be opened.’ **35**And immediately his ears were opened, his tongue was released, and he spoke plainly. **36**Then Jesus[[c](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Mark%207.24-37&version=NRSVA#fen-NRSVA-24496c)] ordered them to tell no one; but the more he ordered them, the more zealously they proclaimed it. **37**They were astounded beyond measure, saying, ‘He has done everything well; he even makes the deaf to hear and the mute to speak.’

There’s something particularly appealing and endearing in our gospel reading about the mother who brings her disturbed daughter to Jesus. She must have known she was taking a risk as a Gentile asking Jesus a Jew to help her.

There are plenty of references in the gospel stories and many more in the Acts of the Apostles and hints in some of Paul’s letters that express a reluctance, a resistance on the part of Jews to having relations with Gentiles, non-Jews. The Jews saw themselves as God’s chosen people – they were indeed God’s chosen people, God made that clear when he dealt with the Old Testament patriarchs, Abraham, Jacob, Isaac. But that did not mean that the Jews were never to have contact with folk outside their ethnic community. Old Testament prophecies about the coming Messiah, Jesus, make it clear that this coming saviour is for the whole world, not for a narrow, exclusive racial group.

Jesus had one or two run-ins with the Pharisees, who were an extreme sect within Judaism. You could compare them with some of the extreme racist, chauvinistic, xenophobic groups who tend to view anyone who looks a bit different from them as inferior beings, to be avoided and deported as soon as possible. In the case of Israel, we can sense that hostility and racism today in the horrendous battles raging in Gaza and the West Bank, Hamas on the one side, ultra-Israelis on the other. German provincial elections and national elections in France are witnessing growing support for far-right parties advocating something approaching ethnic cleansing. What would Jesus’ attitude be?

He was very willing to sit and eat and share time with the lowest, marginalised members of Jewish society – those who are referred to as sinners, publicans and tax collectors in our gospel stories. Such people would have been shunned by the Pharisees because they did not observe the Jewish law in the fastidious way that they did. You’ll remember tax collector Zebedee, who had clambered up a tree to get a good look at Jesus and whom Jesus called down and invited himself to his home for a meal. You’ll remember Levi, referred to in Mark chapter 2, where it describes how Jesus shared a meal with ‘many tax collectors and sinners’, disreputable types.

Jesus also had dealings with folk who weren’t even Jewish. There was the Roman centurion who used the intermediary of Jewish elders to ask Jesus to intervene on behalf of his ill servant. Jesus was impressed with his faith and said, ‘I tell you, I have not found such great faith even in Israel.’ And there was the Samaritan woman Jesus met at the well and asked for a drink – revolutionary behaviour.

And in today’s reading we met the Syro-Phoenician woman who beseeched Jesus to heal her mentally ill daughter. She originated from well outside the territory of Israel, from Syria. She obviously realises she’s taking a risk, as a non-Jewish woman, coming into a distinctly Jewish environment, someone else’s home. She bows down at his feet. She shows deep respect, submission, humility. She brings nothing to this encounter but herself – no money, no payment, no gift – simply the heart of a distressed, loving mother, willing to put her head on the line, surrounded by Jews, bustling round Jesus, trying to keep his presence quiet, to give him some peace after all his ministry in the area, as our gospel reading suggested. The last thing Jesus needed at that point was an interruption, a demand, an urgent demand on his ministry. When you are looking for peace and quiet, when you’ve had your fill of activity, when your cup has run dry, the last thing you want is to be compelled to perform. You’re settling down to a quiet evening, watching television, reading, dozing, enjoying the company of partner or friends and the phone rings, the doorbell sounds, and that puts the kybosh on that lovely relaxing scene. There’s a caller, someone needs something.

Your reaction might not be as pleasant as you would wish. A grimace, a forced smile, clenched teeth. But you acquiesce, you respond. I suspect there was a bit of that in Jesus’ seemingly negative response to this mother. But I also think there was a bit of a test going on – how desperate was this woman? How sincere, how urgent was her request? How far would she go to get Jesus’ attention? How genuine was she?

When we pray in private - I’m not thinking of the choreographed prayers we say in church, crafted and created by others with a lot of thought. But of those prayers we say when no one else can hear, when it’s just God and you, no one to impress with your skilful phraseology, no need to get the grammar right, to choose the best word, but just to let it flow, to let your ideas tumble out in a flood.

Jesus puts a caveat in the way of an answer – she’s not Jewish, she’s foreign; what right has she got to pester Jesus? What he says seems quite cruel – ‘Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs’ – just in case you can’t catch the riddle – the children are the Jews, the dogs the non-Jews. Jesus uses a ploy dear to the Pharisees to get out of helping the woman – insist on his Jewishness and his exclusive right to have access to God.

The woman responds with that amazing statement, ‘Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs.’ We have taken those heart-felt words and embedded them in the words of the prayer of humble access in the communion service – ‘We are not worthy so much as to gather up the crumbs under your table,’ we say. When we say those words, we are echoing the desperation of the Syro-Phoenician woman. Can you imagine yourself on your knees, under the communion table, fumbling and feeling for a blessing, a communion grace that has been dropped because you do not feel yourself worthy to kneel and put out your hands for bread and wine?

And I guess at this point that a smile flickers across Jesus’ face – this is a genuine case. She really means it. She has passed the test. Just to confirm this interpretation, you’ll remember a couple of mini parables that Jesus told about insisting, persisting in prayer. In Luke chapter 11 we read of a chap visiting his friend at midnight to borrow some bread because he has had an unexpected visitor and hasn’t got any food to give him. The so-called friend makes all sorts of excuses not to open up, principally that the family are already in bed, and is desperate to get rid of the annoying caller. Eventually, because the chap keeps on and on badgering him, he does capitulate and get up and give him what he wants. No time to talk about the second parable, that of the widow and the judge – the incident is recounted in Luke chapter 18. Check it out. Jesus says, ‘Will not God bring about justice for his chosen ones, who cry out to him day and night?’ God answers the prayers of his special people.

In a similar way Jesus responds positively to the Syro-Phoenician woman. We’re told he said to her, ‘For saying that, you may go—the demon has left your daughter.’ So she went home, found the child lying on the bed, and the demon gone.

What I find very moving about this episode in Jesus’ ministry is the love, the deep, deep love that the Syro-Phoenician woman shows for her daughter. And because today we have baptised baby Poppy, it seems an appropriate moment to commend all mothers, all parents, all godparents, teachers and others involved with the development and welfare of children to God. That woman went to great lengths to get Jesus’ blessing. She believed that he was the right person to turn to for help in her situation. She disregarded the hostile looks she received as she came into an alien home. She is focused on getting Jesus’ attention and drawing on his healing power. Nothing will stand in the way – however much discouragement she receives, she persists. She achieves her aim.

Without getting too sentimental, I guess most of you have happy, warm memories of your mother, how she cherished you, molly-coddled you at times, rebuked you at others, held you tight when things seemed tough and saw you through them. The Syro-Phoenician mother should be a model for all of us to imitate – not just on behalf of our children or family – but in all our times of desperation and need, the person we should turn to for help is Jesus, the Son of God. From his infinite store of grace he will say – you may go, get off your knees, the demon has left your daughter – in other words, your prayer of faith is answered.