

The Syrophenician woman

Mark 7.24-37

When was the last time you were truly insulted? Not by someone you know, domestic tiffs do often involve insults, but by a stranger?

And not just told off for doing something you perhaps shouldn't, like cutting someone off at the lights, or pushing yourself into a queue, but insulted, needlessly hurtfully?

Such is my life, I am having real difficulty thinking of when that last happened. I am lucky. I am white male in a world where that still matters. In fact I think one of the last times when I was needlessly insulted was in a Hong Kong restaurant, simply for being a *gweilo*, white.

To be called a *gweilo* was not a big insult anyway, there are plenty of worse things you could call me.

There are some things we simply do not call each other in ordinary circumstances. Such is the power of the insult, we do not ordinarily call women "cows," and it turns out that if we do we should apologize, as Grahame Morris has found out. I am not taking a party political stance here, but reminding us that "cow" is still something of a charged word. And if we think that word has power just recall how much power there is in the word "dog"; that word can be truly profane.

So there is understandably some discussion amongst those who preach about what is going on in the text where Jesus encounters the Syrophenician woman. She comes to him with her little daughter who is in need of healing; the little girl is possessed by a demon.

The woman asks Jesus to heal her daughter. He replies, 'Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs.'

Now what are we to make of that? Is it cryptic, playful, or rude? No answer is terribly settling and it certainly sounds rude to my ears, which causes all kinds of problems in interpreting this text.

I read in one respectable commentary that the word dog might not have been so offensive back then as now. Equally I have read elsewhere that it was.

We all know that in saying, 'Oh stop that you old dog' there is a world of difference from 'I am not giving that to you, you dog!' and tone of voice does not carry through multiple translations.

But the response of the woman is truly surprising, she does not flare up, stride off, or become submissive; she is cunning and courageous.

So here comes a bigger question: does Jesus learn something here? Think about that for a second. Did Jesus need to learn to read, I guess so, but did he need to learn how to respond to others... now there's a question.

I was reading, that when Jesus says to the Syrophenician lady 'No' he uses conventional ideas. He calls not just that woman a dog, but all gentiles and in Jewish culture, most dogs were wild and you occasionally fed them by throwing your food to them, and Jesus does say, 'throw it to the dogs.' But the woman's crafty reply seems to assume that the dogs are under the table. She says 'even the dogs under the table,' these are not wild dogs but pets. And by recognizing that dogs can be pets, she is later commended by Jesus, her daughter is healed and gentiles are included and so much happens in that rather remote place called Tyre, that the whole world benefits.

But all this happens not simply because this woman is determined and courageous, but that Jesus engages with her. I think this is harder to picture. Jesus has headed to this place called Tyre perhaps for a break to go to a place where he will be unrecognized. It is a place away from his stamping ground in Galilee and the people there were not like those in Capernaum, they were mostly not Jewish. But this woman does recognize him and calls him Lord, more than that she bows down to him, which in Jewish circles would have been a source of disgrace, women did not bow to men in public. So then there is that uncomfortable conversation but not only does she hang in there but so does Jesus. Yes he is the powerful one in the conversation but his actions are significant. It is strange to think, at least for me, of Jesus acting with courage and learning from it, but perhaps it should surprise us less.

Jesus may well have thought that he was exclusively called to the house of Israel, yet here he engages with a Gentile. Something new happens here and because of it we all get included. Later in the Gospel reading we heard today, another person in that non Jewish area needs healing, Jesus touches him, breaths on him and heals him.

The Gospel is for everyone.

So I wonder about us, and about what encounters we might learn from. I wonder about anyone here coming to church today after a long time, or even for the first time and the courage that takes. I wonder about people who have been insulted, called dogs, especially by people in the church. Churches can be dangerous places as well as places of healing. Take a look at the apology printed on the pew sheet and please know that it is not thoughtlessly placed there.

I wonder too about courage, the courage to persist, the courage to be cunning and forthright but also the courage to change your behaviour when you learn something new, the courage to do something for the first time and the courage to listen to outsiders.

So welcome to any strangers to this church. I truly welcome you here today and I recognize that in welcoming you, you might change me and us, you might help us build a better more loving inclusive community.

And I wonder too what it really takes to change your mind, and even more your behaviour. We have deep-seated behaviours, habits that have formed over years, habits of who we respect and listen to who we will allow into our inner circle of trust. So I wonder what it takes for us to change there, I wonder too what it might mean for me to change. And what would that change be?

Amen

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