

CCV Syro Phon woman

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer.

“Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.”

This must be one of the most shocking and difficult sayings in the Gospels. It looks uncomfortably like Jesus was racist. After all, he calls this woman a dog. He says he’s not going to heal her daughter because she’s not an Israelite. She falls at his feet and asks him to heal her daughter who is possessed by a demon and he at first refuses. He must heal the Israelites first, because they are like the children in the family and Gentiles are the dogs. It’s painful. It’s shocking. How can our Lord be so blatantly and cruelly racist?

This morning I want to hopefully show that as we get into the story Jesus is not racist and in fact, when we understand what’s really going on, this story can show us how God is inviting us to fit into his plan for the world.

It’s worth saying first of all that in an important sense Jesus is challenging the ethnic prejudices of his day. The Jewish people were colonised and oppressed by the Romans. The Romans controlled the land through puppet rulers. The Jews paid high and oppressive taxes to the Romans. For Jesus to wonder around the Roman province of Judea saying that Jews are God’s children and Gentiles are dogs is rather like

wondering around India or Africa under the British Empire and saying that Indians and Africans are children of God and the British are dogs. It is like wondering around Vienna today saying that migrants are children of God and Austrians are dogs. It is reverse racism. It is radically revolutionary. It is taking the side of the weak, the oppressed and the marginalised. That's important context, but the saying is of course still troubling. He still seems to judge her on the basis of her heritage.

Well, let's think about this passage in its broader context within Mark's Gospel. That's always a good principle when reading the Bible, because it's a good principle when reading any book. You'd never try to understand Harry Potter chapter 7 without reading chapters 1-6, so let's not try and do that to the Bible. What else has been going on in Mark's Gospel before and after this point?

Well, in the previous passage, which I think was the reading last week, Jesus declares all foods clean. In other words, he declares the Jewish food laws no longer binding on his people. That is his way of saying that the distinctions between Jew and Gentile don't matter any more. Abolishing the food laws is not important because it's nice to have a bit of ham on our pizzas or a few juicy prawns in a stir fry, it's because the food laws were a way that Israel could keep herself separate. You can't tell if a person is Jewish by looking at them, so, in the ancient world, you tell partly by what they eat. And Jesus is saying that is now irrelevant. Ethnic distinctions have no place in Jesus' kingdom.

So it's clear, both from the fact that Jesus takes the side of the oppressed and the fact that Jesus has abolished the distinction between Jew and Gentile, that he's not being racist. From both the historical context, and

the literary context, from what's going on at the time, and what's going on in Mark's Gospel, Jesus isn't racist.

But then what on earth is this passage about?

Well, I think Jesus is trying to teach this woman something about God's plan and where she fits into it. Because of course he does heal the daughter in the end. He wants to heal the daughter. He wants to bless Jew and Gentile. His plan to extend his love to every people and nation. But he does that by starting with the Jewish people.

That is often God's pattern. God loves people, by loving other people first. God often advances his plans of love for the whole world, by giving gifts to particular people and calling them to use those gifts to bless others. That's what Israel in the Old Testament is. Israel is a people that God chooses out of all the nations and blesses, so that it will then go and be a blessing to every other nation. Israel is specially blessed by God not for its own sake and not because God has favourites but to bring that blessing to every nation.

We see that pattern elsewhere in the Bible. Humans are chosen and blessed out of all the other animals, not because God doesn't care about the animals, but precisely because God loves the animals. God chooses and blesses us, so that we will care and bless the rest of creation. Later on, in Israel's history, God calls and blesses kings and priests and prophets. Not so they can lord it over the rest of Israel and flaunt their wealth and status, but so that they bless and serve the community, by leading and teaching.

And finally now today, God calls and blesses the new Israel, the church. God gives us his word in Scripture, his sacraments, the privilege and the joy of gathering in worship, his Holy Spirit within us. Why? Is it because we're better than others? No. Is it just so we can enjoy those things for ourselves? No. It's so that we can share those blessings with the whole world. God often loves people, by loving other people first. God calls some people his children, so that others can become his children.

I don't know why God does it that way, but I think it might be because it's more relational. God could just zap all the problems of the world away. God could just click his fingers and there'd be peace in the Middle East, no climate change and all our own personal worries and conflicts would be gone. But he doesn't do that. Instead he says, I will bless these people, the church, particularly. And I will love them and bless them very generously. And then I will send them out to heal the hurting world. God could heal all the problems in the world in a second, but it seems he prefers to heal us first and then send us out. He would rather work in us and through us than without us.

That's what Jesus wants this woman to get, I think. He wants her to understand that God loves people by loving other people first. She says "heal my daughter." And he says "I have to love Israel first." And she understands this. She says "Yes, Jesus, I understand you have to love Israel first. But can't you move the plan along. Can't you hurry the plan forward as quickly as possible from Israel to all nations?" And when she says that, he casts the demon out of her daughter. Verse 29: "**For saying that** you may go – the demon has left your daughter." When she gets how God's plan works, the demon is sent away.

All through the passage until this point, the woman's daughter is called simply her daughter. But in v.30, she's called something else. Verse 30 says "so she went home, found the child lying on the bed and the demon gone." She's called "the child". The Greek in which the Gospels were written is just like English or German, the word for daughter, or *Tochter*, is completely different to the word for child, or *Kind*. And suddenly, in the last verse of the story, this daughter is called a child. I wonder if that is a subtle hint from Mark that this woman and her family are children rather than dogs, that Jesus wants to bless Israel, so that he can bless this family and he has blessed this family, so they can now bless others.

When it says the daughter was lying on her bed with the demon gone, the word for bed is similar to the word used for a couch that the ancient Romans reclined on to eat meals. It's like Mark is saying that the daughter now is eating the children's food at the table. This woman and her daughter are God's children, eating bread at his table like anyone else.

When they understand God's plan, they are caught up in it. The woman understands God's plan to love some people, by loving other people first and as she understands it, she is caught up in it and she and her family are themselves blessed. When she wrestles with Jesus and realises that God so often works by pouring blessing on some, so they can pour it on others, God pours blessing on her.

And so what does she do? She shares the blessing with others. Her story is in the Gospel to encourage and challenge two thousand years worth of Christians. The healing of her daughter overflows in blessing to us as we read and hear the story.

So no, Jesus is not racist. God is not racist. God called one people, Israel, to be his instrument of blessing to the whole world. Now he calls us, the church, to be his instrument of blessing to the whole world.

This woman shows us what it means to find our place in that plan. This woman teaches us to say “Lord Jesus, please, love and bless your church, so your church can love and bless the world.” She teaches us to receive Jesus’ love and blessing through the church. She teaches us to be vulnerable to ask others in the church community for help when we need it. God could solve our problems with a click of his fingers, but it seems he’d rather use others, so let’s not be afraid to ask for help.

And of course, this woman teaches us to bring God’s love and blessing to others. God has loved and blessed us so we will love and bless others. This woman is a reminder of the love that God is pouring into us and that we must pour out to others. That is how God works. He gives so we can give again. Let’s receive his love and let’s pass it on.