

Pentecost 15
9/9/2012

Mark the Evangelist

Proverbs 22:1-2, 8-9, 22-23

Psalm 125

James 2:1-10, 14-17

Mark 7:24-30

...why keep a story like that alive?...

Samuel Smith died in Jamestown, South Australia in December 1889, aged 78. He was my great-great grandfather; a well-known pioneer and popular identity in the district. His obituarist wrote: *he led a most chequered career*. Yet Samuel rested in an unmarked grave for 115 years. There was a deep silence about him in the family, which led me to go in search of his story.

Samuel left England with his teenage son Henry in 1854 to make his fortune in Australia. He also left behind a wife and five children. As the mystery of his life slowly came to light, it was revealed he was said to have run off with a black serving maid. In 1871 he married for a second time, despite having a family in England. It was a scandal. It was easy to trace the second marriage but, other than in the story long suppressed in the family there was no clear evidence of the black serving maid. A cousin said: *You are sceptical about this?* I said, so far I have found no hard evidence for it. She replied: *In a conservative family like ours you wouldn't keep a story like that alive if there was nothing in it!* Not long before he died Samuel was among the first to discover silver at Thackaringa in the Barrier Ranges. He staked a claim, that he later lost. But the name of his mine lives on. It was called *The Gipsy Girl*.

Historical research involves deep reflection on the evidence. It means reading the gaps in the text, learning to read the silences and taking seriously people's memories, comfortable as well as uncomfortable.

When it comes to reading scripture, there some stories that are awkward and uncomfortable. In the Gospels the most awkward of these is Jesus' encounter with the Syro-Phoenician woman. It is challenging because it is unparalleled in casting Jesus in a negative light. You wouldn't keep a story like that alive unless there was something in it.

Jesus had gone away to Tyre, the leading city in the northern region of Phoenicia, home to an important seaport with a mixed population in which the Jewish component lived as a minority under pressure [Byrne, *Costly Freedom*, p 125]. Jesus wanted to evade notice, perhaps to avoid further controversy with the religious leadership, or escape other demands. But he was sprung. A Gentile woman whose daughter was gripped by an evil affliction invaded his hiding place, to beg for his healing power. She had no right to help. It could even have been taboo for a Jewish man to help her. In her quest the woman broke through a religious divide as well as a gender barrier, and she exposed Jesus' presence.

Jesus' response to her is depicted as harsh, insulting and prejudiced: *Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and feed it to the dogs.* "Children" refers to "the children of God", the people of Israel. The "food" is the nourishment and healing that Mark proclaims has been emanating from Jesus since the beginning of his ministry, earning him an amazing reputation across many borders.

The idea that the children should be fed first suggests that outsiders may eventually be fed, but not once they are referred to as "dogs". A dog may be our best friend. But we use "dog" to demean, as it does here. The woman was a dog. Dogs were regarded as "unclean", and she was a Gentile: who, according to some, had no prior claim on the grace of God.

If this incident occurred today it would cause a scandal. Jesus would be called to explain, and might even be sent for remedial counselling! But the woman who, on top of being the wrong sex, the wrong race and wrong religion, and would have been expected to keep silent, had the wit to make use of his insult against him. *Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs.* Even unclean outsiders share the feast at the table of the Kingdom. These words brought a change of heart. The barrier was broken. What she begged for was granted to her. Jesus acknowledged her quick wit, but he did not name it as faith.

You wouldn't keep a story like this alive unless there was something in it. Even if it was invented such an uncomplimentary portrait of Jesus would have been kept for a purpose. The scandal of Jesus' response to the woman's request became a pioneering example of the unlimited nature of grace. Wherever this story is told we see that grace falls and feeds and helps whom it wills. The woman is a sign that the renewing powers that are released when the Kingdom begins to break in are not limited to one race, to one gender, or to a holy cast. They are manifest first amongst one people, and in one man, who was a Jew. But, in the generosity of God, this is the platform for them being offered to the world.

There is an interesting aspect in the wider contest of this story that is worth bringing out. In Mark there are two stories of Jesus breaking bread to feed hungry crowds: they bookend this story. The first, the feeding of the 5000, commences at Chapter 6:30, and takes place in Jewish territory. After a series of stories about what constitutes real holiness, and who may receive the grace of God the second feeding story, the feeding of the 4000, happens in Gentile territory. The two stories mark a journey and a development in Jesus' ministry. They show that the nourishment of the Kingdom as it is being proclaimed and enacted by Jesus, is not restricted by normal barriers. It pushes back the demonic, the enslaving powers, it offers refreshment to those outside the fold, and in doing so it redefines the people of God.

As people have listened to this story over many years, different things have been said about why it may have been kept. The clash with woman is a sign that in the beginning the question of who was welcome to share table fellowship in the Christian community was an urgent issue. Jesus' own practice, here and elsewhere, demonstrates the principle of inclusive community, and the Syro-Phoenician woman, a complete outsider, becomes the godmother of the Gentile Mission.

We are used to thinking that Paul was the missionary to the Gentiles, and he was, but the presence of this woman offers another possibility: that women helped spread the Gospel in Gentile territory, before Paul. Deliberate strategies of silence, and those allowed to exist simply because we cling to unchallenged presuppositions about the power of religion and patriarchy are undone by this story's existence.

Feminist theologians have made much of this story. After male interpreters worked on it for centuries, their particular reading of it has opened up new considerations. Some Feminist theologians tell how on gaining entry to the house of scholarly discourse they experienced from men the same treatment as is found here. Their views were resisted and they have had to speak back, re-challenging in a different voice, naming things we have been deaf to; highlighting things we don't even hear in our own speech.

Jesus went to the region of Tyre. It was meant to be a secret journey. A silence was meant to follow. But he suffered a sort of violence – someone broke into his tranquillity to make a request and the sharp edges in his response exposed something new. This story stays because its sharp edges are meant to gain our attention and make us examine whether our understanding of God's inclusive grace is big enough to cope with the realisation that its treasures are not just for us, they are for the world. The sharp edges of this story are for teaching church people like us that the bread of life we have received is not for ourselves alone: it is for others to share.
