

Pentecost 14
6/9/2009

Mark the Evangelist

Proverbs 22:1 – 2, 8 – 9, 22 - 23

Psalm 125

James 2:1 – 10, 14 - 17

Mark 7:24 -37

God shows no partiality

After hassling with the Jewish church leaders Jesus went into Gentile territory for a quiet day. A blank space was meant to follow in this narrative, but it did not happen. If he was hoping no one would recognise him and make demands it did not work. A gentile woman came begging for her daughter to be liberated from the grip of something evil. In context this was an unusual action on her part. It would have been culturally inappropriate for her to approach him, she had no right to ask for help, and there some sense in which Jesus may have been shamed or even defiled by the contact. She was the wrong sex, wrong race and religion, she was normally expected to keep silent, and she was in the wrong place at the wrong time! That is one side of the story, but what comes next is what troubles us. In the argument that follows Jesus appears as an insulting and prejudiced person. If an incident like this occurred today he would risk being referred to an ethics committee for counselling! At the time, and to our ears, referring to the woman as a “dog” was a discriminatory put down. But the woman used his insult against him. Jesus responded to the challenge of her presence and the daughter was freed.

Why did the church keep this story? In the history of interpretation some scholars suggest various attempts have been made to smooth it out, but the sharp edges remain. Jesus’ rejection of the woman is stated in terms of “feeding the children first,” code for saying the people of Israel have priority in receiving his gifts, but one commentator says the word “first” seems to be added, suggesting that originally his was a flat refusal to help.

This is a story from the border. It appears on the margin of a long section about Jesus as a nourishing, freeing presence, that begins with the feeding the 5000 in Israel and ends, just after this, with him feeding 4000 in Gentile territory. He is the Beloved Son and the persistent question for the Early Church was: who is welcome to feed with him? In this episode his initial answer is: the chosen have first call on his gifts, not “dogs.” Whether “dogs” refers to puppies, pets, strays or Gentiles the term is still demeaning but the woman doesn’t argue about that. She picks on the image of bread and turns it around on him: “even crumbs will do!” Her resistance wins out and the inclusive and liberating nature of grace is demonstrated. Matthew says: *“Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for bread, will give a stone... if you who are evil know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good things to those who ask him.”* [Matt 7:9-11].

As people have listened to this story over many years, different things have been said about it. The clash with the woman is remembered because in a radical way, Jesus' own practice, in which he risked defilement, opened the way for a standard of inclusiveness that reached a complete outsider. What was potentially polluting for him was a source of healing for others. We are used to thinking of Paul as the missionary to the Gentiles, but one implication of this story is the Syro-Phoenician woman becomes the godmother of the Gentile Mission. The boundaries of Israel have been transcended: God is the God of all. And it is possible that one implication of this story is that as Christianity took root in Gentile lands, women had leadership roles not previously given to them in the original context. On Father's day it is not a bad point to make: woman played a key part in the story of the Jesus and the story of the church!

Although this story leaves us with some awkward puzzles, seen from one angle the driving concern is: those whom we least expect are counted in. God shows no partiality: Grace abounds. Whatever the reason the church kept this story, its perpetuation has given the unnamed Syro-Phoenician woman an ongoing voice in the church, where even now, men still dominate. The woman is emblematic of those who have been kept out, marginalised and forced to be silent. She is a sign to us that God honours those who appear to have no rights, and who persist in their call on God. She stands as a sign that Jesus' original circle really was an inclusive fellowship in which women and men, Gentile and Jew, rich and poor, were welcomed and had a part to play.

There is a second, complimentary story in the reading today. Because he was unable to ask for himself, friends of the deaf man with a speech impediment brought him to Jesus. This is the story on which a liturgical action used in Baptism (*Ephaphtha*) is based. The minister touches the ears and the lips of the person and says: *may the Lord open your ears to hear his word and your mouth to proclaim his praise*. In this we pray God will touch us in our deepest impediment and our darkest silence. The root of the word obey is connected to the word to hear. There is no speaking without hearing, and once the two faculties were restored in the man there was no stopping him or the crowd from speaking about the liberation that had broken forth. It is a great irony that Jesus had the power to set the man free, but he could not stop the wave of marvellous praise that followed. The news of what Jesus had done continued to go out into the world, and he earned a reputation for the way he treated these two poor souls. His life spoke of how God favours the poor and marginalised, and of how grace reaches beyond the boundaries of what is normal.

There was meant to be silence in two places in our readings today. The woman was not meant to speak to Jesus, and the man healed was meant to tell no one. All that changed because of their encounter with him, which demonstrated the liberality of God's grace towards the world. On this basis, our tendency towards exclusiveness in faith and life is profoundly challenged, and a new freedom becomes possible.

If it is true that Jesus' presence is a force for change that may liberate or bring to life then there is something here, a theological principle, which provides food for thought and a basis for action. The question is, if Jesus is the living demonstration that God shows no partiality, what would the mission plan for this church look like, if this principle were built into every aspect of our life?
