

**“FOREIGN FAITH”**

***Mark 7:24-30***

From time to time I end up in a waiting room – at the dentist or the optician or the doctor – and while I’m waiting to see whoever it is that I (or the child I’m with) have come to see, I find myself leafing through the magazines scattered around the place. Often they include titles like *Now* and *Hello!* and coming back from Birmingham on the train this week I picked up a copy of a tabloid newspaper in which, on the day after Gordon Brown and Tony Blair had been talking about the possible entry of Britain into the European Single Currency, about twelve pages were devoted to whether a young sportsman and his wife were going to live in Spain or not. Most of the other pages, like many of the pages in *Hello!* and *Now*, were filled with very grainy pictures of apparently well-known people lying on beaches or sitting on boats. Some of them I had heard of, some of them I’d pretty well forgotten about, many of them were completely unknown to me.

Presumably, though, the fact that these magazines are so popular and the fact that they all seem to be full of photos of people who are famous for being famous with great difficulty by desperate paparazzi mean that there’s a market for this kind of stuff. Is it human curiosity? Is it that people’s lives are so sad and unfulfilled that they have to get their fun vicariously through peeping into the lives of others? Is it that Sara Cox or Chris Evans or Princess Stephanie of Monaco is so beautiful that we simply have to gaze upon their blurred but otherwise perfectly formed bodies? Who knows? – but it’s not a new phenomenon.

As we’ve already discovered in our journey through Mark’s story of Jesus and his ministry, Jesus is always trying to get away from it all. Having burst on to the scene with his compelling message of a new kind of life, a new perspective on the world, and having offered men and women the opportunity to adopt the new and radical agenda of the Kingdom of God, he has found that it provokes wildly differing reactions in the lives of his hearers. Centuries before, the Hebrew prophets had proclaimed the good news, the “gospel” that God was going to renew creation and reconcile men and women to him once again, and Jesus has arrived not only to repeat that message, but to demonstrate something of what this new Kingdom might look like.

The old rules and regulations, the layers of humanly contrived tradition which have so disfigured God’s own laws, like barnacles encrusting the hull of a ship, are to be swept away as Jesus points people to the basic message of God’s plan – he loves everyone and wants the very best for them if only they’ll listen to him. Those who have fallen victim to some of the consequences of a flawed world influenced by evil – the diseased, the handicapped, the possessed – have had their lives transformed by the touch and the words of Jesus. These are the early signs of the Kingdom which Jesus has come to announce and to inaugurate. But not everyone is happy with them.

Some feel their own hold over people, their own power is threatened. Some genuinely fear for a world without the security of closely worded rules and regulation, who see the possibility of a society going out of control if people are allowed to think for themselves. Some have so carefully constructed their own idea of who God is and what he is like that they have actually created an idol who no longer bears much resemblance to the God of grace and righteousness at the heart of the message of Jesus and the prophets. So they hound him around the place, firing questions at him, setting intellectual and theological traps for him, waiting to pounce on any word or phrase that they consider to be out of place.

And there are others who are so desperate to find out about Jesus, so eager to find healing, hope, meaning that they will follow him anywhere. Those who are curious about this wandering preacher and healer who seems to deliver the goods more consistently than the dozens of other wandering preachers and so-called healers want to catch a glimpse of him. Some are convinced that this is man to lead them in revolt against their Roman oppressors and they want to make him their king. Whatever their motive, they want

to get in on the action. And as there is no long-lens camera, no blurry video footage, no gossip columnist to satisfy their desire for news of Jesus, they have to track him down themselves.

As I've said, Jesus keeps trying to get away from them – strangely so for someone with a message that all the world needs to hear. But he's human as well as divine and he needs time and space to think, to rest, to reflect. He has tried to slip off to pray in a solitary place (1:35), had to avoid the centres of population (1:45), found a quiet spot by the lake (3:7), climbed up into the hills (3:13), had his meals disturbed (3:20), been chased round the lake (6:32,33), and now he has completely moved away from the Jewish areas into Gentile territory, up near Tyre on the north east coast. It's interesting that Mark chooses to include this little excursion at this particular point in his account of Jesus' life.

You may remember, if you were here a couple of weeks ago, that Jesus has just had another argument with the keepers of the Jewish law and tradition on the subject of ritual defilement, being made ceremonially unclean by your environment and circumstances. Now he puts his money where his mouth is, so to speak, and goes into the kind of area where he is almost certain to render himself ritually unclean through contact with non-Jewish people. And the opportunity is used to say something else which is very vital about the new Kingdom of God – another item on the new agenda.

Let's look at this story for a few moments and see what Mark – and Jesus – are trying to say to us through it. Jesus, as we've said, is trying to keep a low profile but once again "*he could not keep his presence secret*" – today the tabloids would have been on to him, the paparazzi would have been circling like birds of prey. And this time he's not harassed by crowds nor harangued by Pharisees, but sniffed out by a woman whose little girl is clearly under the control of the forces of evil. The woman would find herself on just about every list of proscribed people produced by the Pharisees. To start with, she's a woman, so she shouldn't be initiating any kind of contact with Jesus – a Jewish man, very probably a rabbi. Then she's a native of Syrian Phoenicia. That's the area round near Tyre and Sidon where the great merchants of the Mediterranean lived. (Mark calls it *Syrian Phoenicia* to distinguish it from *Libyan Phoenicia*, the area around Carthage on the north coast of Africa.) So she's not in any way connected ethnically with the Jews. She is also a Greek, which means that she is Greek speaking, but also it would mean that she practised a non-Jewish religion. She's not simply a Gentile – she's a *pagan* Gentile, non-Jewish by birth and by religion! She is most definitely not fit company for a good Jewish boy like Jesus.

She's contacted Jesus because she obviously believes that he can help her – "*as soon as she heard about him*" she went to speak to him. She wants her daughter freed from the distressing demonic possession which she sees destroying her from within, and she "*begs*" Jesus to do something about it. And Jesus' reply is very harsh indeed. He makes it very clear that he is here to help "*the children*" and refers to her as one of the "*dogs*". It's a very insulting refusal. The "*children*" are undoubtedly Israel, the Jewish people, the people of God's promise. They are referred to throughout the Hebrew Scriptures as God's children. And the "*dogs*" are clearly the rest of us. That means **you and me**, folks – you can start to feel the force of the reply when it's put like that.

Why does Jesus use this form of reply? Many people – especially those who would call themselves "conservative" Christians – try to soften the force of this reply, despite contending that you need to take this kind of thing at face value elsewhere (where it suits them). I really do think that Jesus is being very rude here, the only thing that could be said in mitigation is perhaps that he is trying to make a point. His eventual agreement to heal the girl is in such stark contrast that he is quite possibly emphasising the great difference between the old way of doing things and the new values of the Kingdom.

Anyway, the woman seizes on Jesus' reply. He has said that the children must be fed "*first*", but that doesn't mean that they are the only ones to be fed. There seems to be a pecking order here. What Jesus has come to bring will first be offered to Israel, the "*children*" of Yahweh. Then there will be the opportunity for others. But the woman recognises that she's at a disadvantage here and says that if the children are being fed, there is bound to be some stuff that falls off the table for the pet dogs underneath.

The children might be first in line and have the choicest bits, but she's still prepared to have anything that's going – even the crumbs, even the leftovers. It's a brave and clever reply – and Jesus respects it (“*For such a reply ...*”) and heals her daughter.

[In passing, there are two things here that are unique in Mark's gospel. Firstly, this is the only place where anyone calls him “*Lord*”. And secondly, this is the only healing done at a distance: the person healed is not actually present with Jesus – he responds to the faith of another.]

Now, the point of all this is once again to emphasise the extent to which Jesus is fulfilling the “gospel”, the good tidings of the Hebrew prophets. Their message was intended to make it very clear that the Messiah was a Jewish figure, someone who was born a Jew and who would exercise a ministry to the Jews themselves. The Jewish people would naturally have first call on his offer of a place in the new kingdom – of course, if the Messiah lived in Israel and spoke Hebrew, then they would be at a clear advantage. But through the work of this Jewish Messiah, large numbers of people from other nations would also be blessed. Whilst it's true that the Jewish people had first refusal, as it were, the offer was not uniquely for them. Salvation is for all people, but it comes through the Jewish Messiah, the Christ. There are plenty of places we could look for evidence of that, but just have a quick glance at *Isaiah 19:19-25* and *Micah 4:1f*.

[Again, in passing almost, look at where Mark places this story. In the previous chapter Jesus has fed the 5,000 plus people who came to hear him by the shore of Lake Galilee – almost certainly a Jewish crowd. The children have been fed. In a couple of weeks' time we'll be looking at the story in the next chapter, the story of Jesus feeding 4,000 other people. Where? Well, in “*the region of the Decapolis*” (7:31), a predominantly Gentile area, where he feeds the “*dogs*”, the non-Jews: Jews first, then the rest]

This woman comes to Jesus with a certain amount of guts. She knows he's a Jewish man and she's a pagan woman. The best she can hope for is that he ignores her – and she could have got a lot worse than insults, too. She has none of the requisite ceremonial qualifications of cleanness and ritual observance. She doesn't have any of the right words. But she has courage, and she has faith. And Jesus answers her request. Yes, the benefits of the Kingdom are offered first to the Jewish people. If God had chosen to send this Messiah, his Son, into the world as a Frenchman or as a Polynesian Islander it would have been the French or the Polynesians who naturally had the first bite at the cherry. But the message is nonetheless for everyone, the offer of new life, of a renewed relationship with God, of meaning and fulfilment in our lives here and now, of a hope for the eternal future – that message is for everyone, for you and me, for those around us here in Lichfield.

And those who want to accept the offer need to respond to Jesus not with ritual observance and careful regard to humanly contrived regulations and traditions, but with an open faith, a faith that will not be put off, that is courageous and consistent. Jesus made absolutely no demands on this woman – he answered her prayer. I do not believe that Jesus makes any initial demands on us when we first come to him to ask for his help, his healing, his forgiveness. Fair enough, there are all kinds of commitments that we need to take seriously *after* that first step, but to start with Jesus asks nothing of us other than belief. The Pharisees, the guardians of tradition put all kinds of barriers in the way of people who wanted to come to God: they had to sort themselves out first. Jesus asks nothing. It is all of grace, all at his initiative.

Just think again about those great figures from Jewish history, the great characters of the Hebrew Scriptures – Abram, Isaac, Jacob, Gideon, Samson. God spoke to them, offered them his grace, promised to bless them while they were still pretty well outsiders: they certainly hadn't taken great steps to make themselves fit for God's blessing. But once they'd accepted there was a great deal of commitment required. Paul, in his letter to the Christians in Rome, writes, “*while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.*” We still make it so difficult for people to come to Jesus because we slap on all kinds of expectations before they can accept his offer of grace. We have our own ritual and traditions and ways of getting

ourselves “clean” before we can approach God, but Jesus says if you’ve got the faith, if you’ve got the courage, then this new way of life is for you: you’ll learn as you go along.

The restaurant of God’s grace has no rules about who can eat there. The Jewish people had their opportunity first, but now it’s open to all. Jesus offers you his love and grace – and an awful lot more that is on the menu. You don’t even need to sit under the table and wait for the crumbs now. Will you accept what he offers you?

### **Questions for discussion**

1. What do you think was the main motivation for the crowds who followed Jesus around? What do you think draws people to Jesus today?
2. Jesus’ reply to the woman was very harsh. Why do think he chose to speak to her in that way?
3. Do you agree that the Jewish people had an advantage over Gentiles in the announcing of God’s grace? Why/why not?
4. Discuss the tension between the unconditional grace of God to all who seek his love and the very clear ethical demands on those who want to follow Christ.
5. What have you learned from this story that is new to you?