

Text: Mark 7:24-8:21

Theme: Who is Jesus to You?

Sermon delivered by Revd Canon Dele Agbelusi during Service of the Word on 03/12/2017 at 10.30am

In the previous verses, Mark 7:1-23, the Jews think they are 'clean' and Jesus told them that they are not clean, because uncleanness and sin come from inside. Now Jesus turns away from the Jews and goes to a Gentile area. This is taboo to a Jewish man and the religious elite. When you realize that every morning some Jewish males used to pray, 'Lord, I thank you that I am not a Gentile, a slave or a woman', you begin to understand what a bold move this was. But Christ is a boundary breaker. And it is that boundary that Jesus is breaking in this passage as He enters Gentile territory; firstly 'Tyre' (vv. 24-30), then 'Sidon' (vv. 31-37).

A faithful Jew would have nothing to do with Gentiles and would never enter a Gentile's house. The Jews thought that the Gentiles were not clean. However, Jesus wants to show that Gentiles are the same as Jews. Both Jews and Gentiles need God to change them inside. What boundaries are we prepared to cross to bring the gospel to lost people - racial, social, economic?

If Jesus is the boundary breaker, He is also the faith provoker. This gentile lady came to Jesus with a desperate need – her little daughter was possessed by an impure spirit (v25) and she begged Jesus to drive the demon out of her. Jesus does not make it easy for this Gentile lady, and even appears rude: 'it is not right to take the children's bread and toss it to their dogs' (v. 27). The 'children' are the Jews, and the 'dogs' are Gentiles – not very nice! What is Jesus playing at?

In that day, Jews often called Gentile, “dogs”, in a very derogatory contemptuous way. But Jesus took the sting out of the word by using another word that is translated “little dogs”- or puppies, thereby reminding her of her place as a Gentile yet, not pushing her away.

Jesus knows this lady's heart, and is waiting to see if His provocative words will draw faith from her. And she gives a brilliant reply which shows she is hungry for Christ's grace - 'even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs' (v. 28). Christ cannot resist the woman's faith, and assures her that her daughter is healed.

When Jesus tests her faith, she does not give up. She does not mind being a 'dog', if she can have the crumbs from the table! See how she accepts what Jesus says (Mark 7:28).

She addressed Jesus as Lord. She accepted her low place before Jesus by not debating the reference to little dogs. Second, she asked Jesus to deal with her on her own level. If the woman had responded, “who are you calling a dog?” she would not have received from Jesus what her daughter needed. Her humble, faith filled submission to Jesus brought the victory.” **Nothing appeals to Jesus more than faith coupled with humility and persistence. Then Jesus told her, “For such a reply, you may go; the demon has left your daughter”.** She is happy to go home, because she trusts Jesus. She expects to find her daughter well.

It does not matter who you are. It does not matter how bad you are. It does not matter if you do not come from a Christian family. If you know that you need Jesus, Jesus will not send you away.

Remember that the disciples are watching Jesus. They have not often seen Jews believe like this! But this Gentile woman believes!

Clarke praised the prayer of this woman and showed it had 9 notable features: “1. it is short; 2. Humble; 3. Full of faith; 4. Fervent; 5. Modest; 6. Respectful; 7. Rational; 8. relying only on the mercy of God; 9. persevering.”

A Miracle with a Message (Mark 7:31-37)

In this next miracle, Jesus is not simply being shown as the boundary breaker, or the faith provoker, but also the 'great Creator'. This time He is in the neighbouring town of Sidon (v. 31), where He meets a deaf man who 'could hardly talk' (v. 32). If Christ can conquer social and religious boundaries, He can also conquer physical ones - deaf and mute together suggest unusually difficult physical limitations. Besides, **in the healing of a deaf and dumb man, we can see the portrayal of the Jews and Jesus disciples who have failed to understand who Jesus is.**

This miracle is like a picture to teach the disciples. The miracle is not really harder than all his other ones. So why does Jesus make this miracle seem like a big thing? Why does Jesus sigh? Why is he sad? Jesus sees that the people and his disciples are like this deaf man. It is like they are deaf to God's truth. They too need a miracle. They need a miracle to change their hearts.

Jesus is sad about the deaf man. Jesus is always sad when we are in trouble. Jesus is sad about the disease and pain in the world. However, he is sadder when people do not believe in him.

Mark 7:33-35

First Jesus shows that he can heal this man. The man cannot hear, so Jesus does things that he can see. He puts his fingers in the man's ear and touches his tongue. Now the man knows that Jesus will heal him. Next Jesus shows the man that he needs God's miracle. So Jesus looks up to heaven. Then he tells the man's ears and tongue to open. And they do!

Christ, of course, could heal without any melodrama, but He deliberately touches the man's tongue with His spit, reminiscent of God breathing life into Adam's nostrils, and speaks the word that reopens the man's ears - with an accompanying 'sigh', reflecting His frustration at a sin-marred creation as he looks up to heaven. And suddenly we are back in Genesis 1, watching the great Creator at work!

A deaf person cannot make himself hear! We cannot make ourselves believe. We need God's miracle. It is not enough to hear about Jesus. We need Jesus to open our ears so that we can understand. We need Jesus to open our mouths so that we can tell people who Jesus really is. Last week we saw our need for Jesus to remove hard hearts from us and give us soft hearts that can receive God's word and not bounce it back. Will you ask Jesus to do that? Ask for yourself; ask for your friends.

Why does Mark include the story of the feeding of the 4,000 (vv. 1-10), when he has already told us about the feeding of the 5,000? As you read the story, you realize it is almost a carbon copy, bar a few minor differences. But perhaps that's the point!

While the feeding of the 5,000 has a clearly Jewish setting, and the twelve baskets left over represent the twelve tribes of Israel, the 4,000 is set in a Gentile context. Jesus has just completed a ministry tour of Tyre and Sidon, and it is 'During those days' (v. 1), in Gentile territory, that He feeds the 4,000. Seven basketfuls are left over this time, a number that represents fullness in Scripture. The point of the story is that Jesus is just as sufficient a Saviour for the Gentile as for the Jew; for the 'outcast' as well as the 'insider'.

Mark 8:4-10 shows us that the disciples were the same as before. The same reaction as shown by Mark's record of their statement: "Where in this remote place can anyone get enough bread to feed them?" (Mark 8:4). No one said: 'Why not give them food from heaven, like last time?' They think that it is impossible to feed this crowd! This is because they still do not see who Jesus is. (Mark 8:21) "He said to them, "Do you still not understand?"

The people were the same as before. (Mark 8:8,9). They were all full. They were happy that Jesus had fed them. However, they were happy to go away from Jesus. They were just like the 5,000 Jews who Jesus fed. **They liked the miracle. But they did not see who Jesus was. They did not think: 'If Jesus makes bread and fish for us, he must be God. He must have come for us!' Therefore, they did not follow Jesus. They just went home.**

We hear many things about Jesus. We like to hear them. We believe the stories. However, do we really see who Jesus is? If we do, then how will it show? How will it show in your life? How will it show in your life as a member of this church congregation?

Verses 11-12

How ironic that following one of Jesus' major miraculous signs, He is questioned 'back home' by the Pharisees for His failure to produce 'a sign from heaven' (vv. 11-13)! Mark tells us Jesus 'sighed deeply' [v. 12]. He had previously sighed when He came across a deaf and mute man in Gentile territory. Now He sighs because of the spiritual deafness of Pharisees, who were the self-proclaimed guardians of pure Judaism, but could not recognize the Son of God when He walked into their neighbourhood (see John 1:12). 'Jews demand miraculous signs', said Paul later, 'and Greeks look for wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified' (1 Cor.1:22,23). Christ will never satisfy the miracle chasers, or the sophist. His cross stands against all form of human pride and celebrity. The naked Christ, gasping for air, utterly broken, who is our redemption will always be out of reach for those who want the spectacular.

We can become like the people close to us! Who have you become like? Perhaps your husband or wife? Your parents or your friend? We can start to think like them and talk like them.

Jesus says: 'Be careful! Watch out!' The disciples knew that the Pharisees hated Jesus, but there was still danger. The disciples have started to think like the Pharisees. How did the Pharisees think? (Mark 8:11, 12). Jesus was sad, because he saw how hard their hearts were. Who are the people who think wrong things about Jesus today? (People on the television or radio, politicians, teachers, friends?) Have you started to think like them about Jesus and Christian witness?

Mark 8:16-21

The disciples did not understand Jesus. They thought that he was talking about bread! Jesus asks two questions; 1. **'Do you not remember?' Are your hearts hardened? (Mark 8:18-20).** Of course the disciples remembered what happened! But they had not learnt the lesson. They still did not believe who Jesus was!

Do you remember the things that you have learnt about Jesus? And does that change you? Do you trust in Jesus now? Or 'Do you still not understand?'

No, they did not understand. They were like blind men, or deaf men. They had seen Jesus do so much, they had heard Jesus say so much. But they still did not understand. Their hearts were still hard. They needed a miracle.

The disciples are still blind. They cannot see who Jesus is. They need a miracle. The next thing we read is a miracle! (Mark 8:22-26) A blind man sees. It is another miracle with a

message (like Mark 7:31-35). Straight after this miracle, Peter shows that he now sees! He sees that Jesus is the Christ, the Saviour. (Mark 8:27-30). Mark 8:29 answers the big question of Mark 1-8. 'Who is Jesus?' Jesus is the Christ!