

## Season of creation: unflattering stories

Mark 7:24-37

It's slightly too easy to conflate the Gospel stories. I know, because I had to throw out half a sermon that I then checked a finer detail and realised I was writing about the Matthew version of this story, not Mark's version. In Matthew's version, the woman who approaches Jesus is a Canaanite woman. An indigenous woman of the region, from one of those groups of people who, according to the books from Deuteronomy to Judges, should have been wiped out as a people. Somehow her people had survived an attempted genocide.

In Mark's version, the woman is a Syrophoenician. Jesus had gone to the region of Tyre – a port in modern-day Lebanon (in the Roman province of Syria). Tyre was reasonably well-known through Jewish history. There are positive references, such as the work with David and Solomon to build the palace and Temple. However, the majority of the references to it are antagonistic. Jezebel, the most infamous of the Queens, was born there. Ezekiel, Amos, and Zechariah all prophesy its destruction; Isaiah, on the other hand, says it will be forgotten and destroyed for 70 years.

In an earlier story, Mark recounts that people came from all over to hear Jesus, including from the region around Tyre and Sidon. Presumably, therefore, it was a bit ambitious to go near Tyre and expect that he could take a break since people from that area had come to Galilee to hear his preaching. Then again, unlike today, Jesus could not simply book a hotel and go off on a holiday to take a break. Staying somewhere like Tyre, perhaps it was more likely that he could get a bit of time out from his busy schedule.

So there is Jesus, tired and desperate for a break – I am sure that at least at sometime during our lives we have known that feeling – and a woman approaches him for help. How is he going to respond? Given his compassionate responses to other requests for help, including to an individual in the very Gentile Decapolis, we might expect that he immediately responds to this mother's request. What happens next seems to be completely out of character for him.

Over the years, you may have heard a variety of interpretations of this story justifying how Jesus responded. One common interpretation is that Jesus was just simply testing her faith. Another points out the Greek used here uses the diminutive of "dogs" so suggests puppies or pets. However, biblical scholars tear both of these interpretations to shreds. The reality is the author depicts Jesus as insulting this woman and the woman is fighting back to get what her daughter so desperately needs.

How many of us would have been like that woman? Would you have answered back to get what your daughter needs, or would you have gone off quietly and hoped to find another solution? It's hard to know until we are in that position, and while we would all do anything for our children, it would be challenging to do that "anything" when we are in a system that says we are the bottom of the heap, and the person we are asking is far more important. Even if she was a wealthy woman – and there is no evidence either way – and Jesus was a poor itinerant teacher, think about how you would react to being insulted when you have treated this teacher with such great respect. So, whichever way we look at it, in this story Jesus is hardly being his usual polite and compassionate self.

It's not a very flattering story to include in the Gospel, is it? Which brings up the question of why it was included in the first place. In an era when the equivalent of biographies were always written in a very flattering light (perhaps why miracle stories in biographies were quite a common occurrence), this story that portrays Jesus as being grumpy or insulting is a bit of an odd inclusion.

The majority of commentators talk about how this story shows the inclusion of the Gentiles in a new way and so was probably included to justify the mission to the Gentiles. However, let me suggest two different and connected reasons why this might have been a story that was told.

Firstly, we see a very human side to Jesus. This is a person who gets tired and fed up, who needs a break, but does not often get it. It affirms that we cannot always be at our best, whether this is in ministry or in our wider life. Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, it shows Jesus growing and learning from a mistake. He has insulted the woman to get her to go away and she gives a fairly smart comeback. We see her being praised here not for her faith but for her mouthiness. How do we respond when we have someone challenging the boundaries that we have traditionally found acceptable? Do we double down on them, as the Pharisees did in last week's reading, or do we reflect on it and grow, as Jesus does this week?

And what might we take away from this reading in relation to the theme of Sustainable September? After I had started writing this reflection, I came across a quote that is wrongly attributed to St Augustine:

Hope has two beautiful daughters; their names are Anger and Courage.  
Anger at the way things are, and Courage to see that they do not remain as they are.

We see these attributes in the Syrophenician woman as she confronts the man who refuses to heal her daughter. All too often the environment is also like this woman – feeding off the crumbs under the table as we have too many other things to cope with – cost of living crisis, unemployment, homelessness, and the youth detention centres, to name but a few. Gains for the environment are immediately undone when other pressures are placed on society.

How then do we respond to the need we see around us. Will we, like the Pharisees in last week's reading, make sure we wash our hands properly and keep ourselves clean? Or will we, like Jesus this week, engage and learn as we are challenged by the new needs that we encounter?

We are reminded this year to "hope and act with creation." Where are you called to respond with those two beautiful daughters of hope: Anger and Courage?