

Sunday between 4th and 10th September [23]

Mark 7:24-37

It is pretty difficult for us to really understand the separation between Jews and gentiles, particularly in this nation of many and varied nationalities and backgrounds. But we all, as human beings, have a sense of us and them. On all sorts of levels we separate ourselves from other people, such as which team we support at a particular sport or which political party we align with. Many of these us and them separations are things we discuss and can even enjoy the company of our opponents, other separations run a little deeper, such as separation because of difference in language – where no matter how much we like the look of the other person we have no means to form a relationship with them without a lot of work!

But none of these examples truly equates with the Jew/gentile divide. That was perhaps the deepest possible divide of people, ordained by God through his designation of the children of Abraham as his chosen people. If this little group were set apart as chosen, that means the rest are rejected, right?

That was certainly how the Jewish nation lived, their superiority assured by the covenant they have with God. So, in order to preserve God's favour, interactions with the other had to be strictly policed and initiation into the religion of Judaism was not easy to obtain. And yet, even in the Hebrew scriptures, there are prophecies of God's favour on the whole of humanity based not on lineage but on the individual's response to God.

And yet, when Jesus was approached by the Syro-Phoenician woman, a gentile, he openly refused to help her and he challenged her by comparing the needs of the gentiles with the needs of a family dog, while comparing the needs of the nation of Israel with the children in a family. These are some of the most shocking words to have been attributed to Jesus. Jesus was constantly challenging the status quo, he would speak with women and mix with sinners. He would omit to follow all the rules of Sabbath and ritual washing and he would justify all those things confidently and logically. Yet here was a mother, desperate and in real need, and it seems that Jesus initially at least couldn't care less.

He had a mission to fulfil and these gentiles were not part of that mission; that is what he is saying. Could it be that this was the moment when Jesus realised that in fact his mission was not just to the Jews but rather the time was ripe for the long ago prophesied favour of God upon anyone and everyone who responds to him and his love. It seems that Jesus, although fully divine, was also fully human and as such, just like us, could be moved in his opinion and convinced by the arguments of another of their need and their motivation. Some have, in contrast, suggested that Jesus was simply testing the woman, but that is almost a crueler explanation. Somehow making the gentile woman beg a little harder for her miracle to prove her faith doesn't sound that much like Jesus either.

The reality is that we have no idea why Jesus initially refused the requests of this woman, but we recognise the Jesus who finally made her daughter well. As the woman responds in her desperation by accepting the label Dog but continuing to argue that even the dogs have worth and deserve to be cared for, she has displayed

a faith in Jesus that no obstacle, not even his own refusal to help, would be allowed to get in her way. We have seen this side of Jesus many times in the gospels; he looks not at the person's history or lifestyle, but at their heart when he encounters them. The blind man he cured when the Pharisees accused he or his parents of sin, Jesus refused to be drawn on that, no the man was simply healed, and glorified God because of it. The 5000 who were fed, amongst them we are told all were healed, no quiz about past behaviours or genuine family links back to Abraham, the faith that had them drop everything and follow Jesus was enough.

We hear the words from Christ after many healings, go, your faith has made you well. Perhaps Jesus did not expect to find that faith in the Syro-Phonecian woman, perhaps he didn't expect her to really know who he was, perhaps he was surprised by her. Whatever the reason, Jesus' ultimate response of healing in response to faith that day became the blueprint for Paul's ministry and later to the ministry of the whole church.

St Paul was proud of his ministry to the gentiles, he saw no separation in Christ of Jew or gentile, but used the imagery of a tree, the root and branches, originally the Jewish people, but over time some branches have been removed and more excitingly, new branches, from other trees, have been grafted on. Those new branches, the gentiles, are reminded that they need to be sustained by the root and not the other way around, and yet this is possible, we can all become a part of the tree, no longer is it just about our birth and lineage, but by grace, we are all acceptable to God.

But let us not think that we are safe from making the mistakes of the past. We are always at risk of becoming like the Jews, confident of our own salvation and keen to mark out the world into two categories, us and them. Scripture tells us that not all are saved, Jesus said not everyone who says to me, Lord, Lord will enter the kingdom of God. But just as the us/them divide is not about bloodlines and family trees, neither is it about anything else that we would contrive to ensure all church people are just like us. It is a natural human response to surround ourselves with people who are like us, who speak the same language, who share the same ideals, in whom we recognise ourselves. But God calls whom God will and our role is to welcome, to love, to teach and to share with anyone and everyone who find that God's call leads them here.

The world seeks to divide, God seeks to unite. Let us in all our encounters find opportunities to do God's uniting work so that we, like Jesus, when challenged by those who are different, may see within them the faith we all may receive, by God's grace alone.