

St. Bride's Church of Scotland, Newtonmore

Rev. Catherine Buchan

SCRAPS FROM THE TABLE

6th September 2015

Mark 7:24-37

Isaiah 35:4-7

The Syrophenician woman who came to Jesus and was initially refused by him is one of the most intriguing stories in Scripture. It seems to be one of these stories where you just wish you could be there to hear not just what was said but how it was said and with what gestures. Was Jesus deadly serious when he said that the children must be fed first and referred to the Gentiles as “dogs”? Could this be the same Jesus who conversed easily with the Samaritan woman at the well, or who was happy to heal the Roman centurion's servant? Could he now be turning down someone because of their race? Because they weren't Jewish, as he was?

I am sure that Jesus was speaking with a twinkle in his eye, and he was making a joke. After all, for him the situation was quite funny. Jesus knew well that his personal calling was to bring the good news to the Jews, because, and this was orthodox Jewish belief at the time, when Israel was redeemed, that would be the time when the Gentile world would also be brought into God's kingdom. And since in an effort to do this he had just been doing some quite risky teaching, as we read last week, he had come to Tyre, outside of Israel, to lie low for a while. He hadn't come to draw attention to himself. But no sooner was he here than this woman appears with her needs and demands. And Jesus knew he wasn't primarily an itinerant healer, but the Messiah come to inaugurate God's kingdom, and a miracle in Tyre might give all the wrong signals; but the woman is in need, and her daughter is in need, and what is he to do? It is a funny old world, he must have been thinking, and a funny old situation he has got into. It certainly wasn't something he had planned to happen when he took his time out in Tyre.

We are told that the woman was a Syrophenician. Did she know who she was coming to, what she was asking for? She must have been a desperate mother: any parent whose child is ill with no way of being healed will become desperate. I expect that she had gone from one healer to another, seeking a way to have her daughter restored, and that when she heard vague rumours – because Mark tells us that Jesus could not escape notice – when she heard rumours about Jesus she would rush off to see if he might help, just hoping, hoping against hope.

And Jesus called her a dog and said he was only going to feed the children. He is probably thinking about the controversial teaching he has just been giving, about what is clean and unclean, and knows that to his adversaries, this woman's daughter would be called unclean. Indeed Mark tells us she has an “unclean” spirit. I think he was teasing a little. I think he was trying out the standard Pharisaic response, almost as a game, to see how it would work. And he got his answer: it didn't. That sort of answer will never work with those who are desperate.

Our nameless woman wasn't giving up that easily. After all, Jesus hadn't said that he could not heal her daughter. And so the woman says, that she is not asking for much, not asking to deprive the children at all: all she needs is a few crumbs, as it were, and that even the dogs were given that. Jesus has been teasing her, but now he is impressed by her answer and her desperation. He makes no fuss, he is not seen to be going to her house, but he does heal her daughter. It is not long before he will die, and then the Jewish Messiah will become the Saviour of the world. In the meantime, how can he deny this woman a scrap from God's table?

I was thinking about this story all week, and thinking about the woman's desperation and humility. She knows what she needs. She doesn't want to deprive anyone else to attain it, but she knows what she, or rather her daughter, needs. And I have been thinking about her when I have seen more and more stories about people who have had to leave their homes, in Syria and other places and have become what the media likes to call "migrants" in Europe. I hate that word "migrant", because it is a dehumanising word, especially if it is used too often. It lumps people together and denies their individuality. But these are people, individuals, each with a desperate need. They are not coming to Europe to deprive anyone of what they have – or that is not their intent. It is not some great plot to take over and destabilise Europe or her countries. They are coming because they are desperate, and their children are desperate and there is nowhere else to turn. They are seeking the scraps from our tables.

Have you noticed, following the news, how the locations of the headlines have shifted over the past weeks? At first it was Lampedusa and Italy – and of course Malta – we knew about that situation best of all for several years. Then the headlines moved to Greece and Macedonia. Then to Hungary. I am friendly with the Church of Scotland minister in Budapest. Early this week he posted pictures on the internet showing the main train station with homeless people camped out on all the platforms, a truly eerie situation. Just two days later the media was full of pictures of people being kept out of that station by armed guards. And then the headlines moved north to Austria and you know that they will continue to move northwards, not just to Calais.

It is something that makes people think. All these people looking for safety, for security, for a roof and food. The people of Iceland have been so outraged at their government's announcement that they might take 50 families, that 10000 of them have gone on line to offer rooms in their homes; and there have been protests in Germany against those who would ban these people and keep them out. Those who do this can see that these are people, seeking the scraps off the table, not to deprive anyone, but because they are desperate. Perhaps some of them also see that surely our Christianity means nothing at all if we dismiss them as "migrants" and do all we can to keep them at bay. Yes, lots of extra people in the country can be a challenge, but our civilisation, never mind our faith, means nothing if it cannot rise to such a challenge. I hope that as the headlines move north one day they will be here, even here in Badenoch, as well as in Edinburgh and Glasgow, Dundee, Inverness and Aberdeen. And when desperate people arrive among us, in waves or in ones and twos, I hope that we will be like Jesus. Healing the Syrophenician's daughter did not fit in with Jesus' plans, but he did it none the less. We are called to follow in his footsteps.

And when I think of that desperate woman, as well as thinking of all the hopeful, desperate people travelling to and through Europe, I think of us as well. I think of us, Christian people coming around God's table as we do this morning. All of us welcomed, even those who Jesus knows will not always be faithful, not always react to life in his way of welcome and embrace for the stranger.

We come because we are desperate. Christianity is not a faith for the contented, you know. Jesus never really connected with those who were pretty satisfied with life, thank you very much. He connected with the sick and those deemed unclean, he connected with the poor and the hungry, with the bereaved and those who were branded sinners by others. One of the real challenges which we face in the Western church these days is the challenge of prosperity. We forget our inner desperation because of our outer satisfaction.

But we are desperate. All of us have flaws and failings which we try to cover up and would rather not acknowledge, but that doesn't take them away or stop them affecting our lives, now as well as for eternity. Some of us know we are desperate for help because we have faced or are facing times of great difficulty in life. Most of us can forget our desperation for long stretches of time. But our inner state is still that we need God, we need his grace, his mercy, his acceptance, and presence and provision. Most of all we need the gift of his Son to open his kingdom to us and allow us to come in.

And so today we come around God's table. We come, not because we are worthy to come, we come because we know our need of God's grace in our lives. We come seeking the scraps from Christ's table, but we find that we are given places of honour at a banquet. Because that is the grace and mercy of God. He does not give grudgingly, unwillingly, because we have forced his hand. He gives smilingly, gladly, openly and generously. Like the prodigal son in Jesus famous story, we come seeking to be treated as servants or slaves, and we find that the fatted calf is killed for us, and that the best clothes are placed on our backs and we are welcomed to a feast. So come to the table, you who need the scraps and are desperate for grace. Come and know the generosity of your God. And as you receive from him, so learn from him to be those who in turn can meet desperation and need with a smiling open hand. Amen

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