

Messianic Break-in

Mark 7:24-37

Introduction - Big Picture or Personal Story

A few days ago we commemorated the 75th Anniversary of D-Day. D-Day marked a critical point in World War II with the Western Allies seeking to liberate Europe from the rule of Nazi Germany. The statistics concerning D-Day are staggering: over 11,000 aircraft were involved, over 6,000 sea vessels, over 150,000 troops from twelve nations landed in Normandy, and from those troops there were over 10,000 casualties including over 4,000 deaths.

While it's possible to be overwhelmed by statistics, imagine if you were to try to follow the story of individual soldiers. If we were to focus on a soldier would we find out that he was a young British man who had a young wife and she was eagerly awaiting his return so they they could start a family? Would we see the young man leap from the landing craft and rush up the beach seeking to find an area that had cover from enemy fire? What would it mean to us to know the thoughts going through the young man's head? What emotions would the soldier be feeling? Fear? Confidence? Enthusiasm? Anger? Hope? And this is just one man. What possibility is there to consider the personal story of just one percent of the men who landed? Even hearing the story of just one percent of the soldiers who landed which would mean we're trying to hear the story of over 1,500 men.

We can tell that just as statistics can be overwhelming while leaving us struggling with the personal impact of an event, so the recording of personal accounts can also overwhelm us and leave us struggling to grasp the bigger picture and broader impact of what is going on.

This morning we're looking at two little stories in Mark's gospel which are interesting and touching but they are also part of a bigger picture and indeed mark a critical point in Jesus' ministry.

The Priority Of Jesus' Ministry (vv. 24-30)

The first story is of a Gentile woman, a non-Jew, coming to Jesus and asking for Jesus' assistance for her daughter who is being oppressed by a demon. We find this story somewhat confronting and difficult because Jesus appears to be quite nasty to the woman when she makes her request. Let's read again Jesus' reply in verse 27, "First let the children eat all they want," he told her, "for it is not right to take the children's bread and toss it to the dogs." Ouch! What's going on here? Jesus normally heals people when they ask. Why is Jesus referring to this woman as a dog? Is Jesus being racist or was he just having a bad day because he was tired and didn't want to be disturbed?

To answer this we need to note that the term 'dogs' was a fairly common and known title which Jews used for non-Jews, that is Gentiles. The term dogs is not a polite term but is predominantly used to indicate that the Gentiles were unclean not physically and not even necessarily morally, but the Gentiles were unclean spiritually. This helps us understand the meaning of 'dogs' in this context, but why does Jesus initially reject the woman's request? The account of this story in Matthew's Gospel helps us here. Matthew's account in chapter 15 is a little fuller and there we read that Jesus' reluctance is connected to his task. In Matthew 15 verse 24 Jesus says, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel." So then, Jesus' initial refusal to heal this woman's daughter is because Jesus was sent to the Israelites and not to the Gentiles.

We stand after the death and resurrection of Jesus and after Jesus commanded his followers to make disciples of all nations and so find it hard to understand Jesus' exclusive focus upon the Israelites but at this time this is what Jesus was sent to do. Interestingly though we're about to see that the scope of Jesus' ministry is widening.

Now turning back to the story at hand, we know that Jesus' initial refusal is not the end of the story, the woman gives a witty and faith-filled response which prompts Jesus to grant her request. Let's read verses 28-30 again,

'Lord,' she replied, 'even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs.'

Then he told her, 'For such a reply, you may go; the demon has left your daughter.'

She went home and found her child lying on the bed, and the demon gone.

The woman accepts the way Jesus describes the Gentiles as dogs, she doesn't try to argue and say that the Gentiles were inherently worthy, but rather she notes that the dogs get the crumbs that fall from the children. From the woman's response Jesus recognises that she has faith that he can supply her daughter with a mere crumb and so Jesus promises the mother the rescuing of her daughter which she was asking for. We have a happy outcome to this very personal story.

The Context And The Blessing To The Gentiles (vv. 14-30)

Before we move on though, remember how I was talking about D-Day and mentioned that the more closely we examine a personal account the more difficult it often is to see the bigger picture and observe the critical events? This is one of those occasions, so what I'd like to do now is take two steps back and consider this story a little more in its context and broader situation to consider if there's a critical event or issue which we should be mindful of and this will also help us understand why Jesus used the term 'dogs' and initially rejected the woman's request.

The first step back I want to take is to the immediate context. It's always important to put Bible verses and stories into their context and last week we read these words of Jesus in verses 18-20, “‘Don't you see that nothing that enters a person from the outside can defile them? For it doesn't go into their heart but into their stomach, and then out of the body.’ He went on: ‘What comes out of a person is what defiles them. For it is from within, out of a person's heart, that evil thoughts come – sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly. All these evils come from inside and defile a person.’”

So then, Jesus has just said that it's not the external indicators which make someone unclean but rather it's what comes out from the inside, from a person's heart which makes them unclean. For Jesus, in the very next story, to describe the woman, and Gentiles in general, as dogs would seem to mean that Jesus is either being a hypocrite or that there's something more going on.

Let me explain why I think there's something more going on. The use of such a derogatory term is out of character for Jesus when he is dealing with people making genuine requests but what could Jesus possibly be hoping to achieve by deliberately using a derogatory term if he didn't really want to insult the woman? Well, having reminded us of the context, I think Jesus is creating a real-life example of what he has just been teaching about. Here is a person who has three factors which would make her unclean for the typical Jewish Pharisee or teacher of the Law. First, the person is, quite clearly, a woman. Women were not unclean in God's eyes but held a low position in society. Second, the woman is a mother of a child who is oppressed by a demon. The child being afflicted in this way would also taint the mother's image and reputation. Third, and probably most significantly, she is a Gentile, an unclean person outside of the Jewish religious structures, a dog.

As mentioned earlier, Jesus has a legitimate reason to refuse the woman's request because his task was to the Israelites, but seeing this broader context helps us note that by Jesus using the term dogs for Gentiles he is confirming this woman's unclean position according to the external indicators laid down by many Jews and especially the Pharisees and teachers of the law. The crucial question is, will the woman rise up and show by what comes out of her that she is clean despite the external indicators? The answer of course is that she does. Her reply, what comes out of her, demonstrates her faith and thus her clean heart.

By taking one step back and putting this story in its immediate context we see that by Jesus using a derogatory term, that appears very out of character, he has succeed in demonstrating precisely what he had just been teaching about. It is what comes out of a person which makes them clean or unclean and this woman is clean.

What then is the second step back to see if there's a critical event or situation taking place? We've talked around this already and so I won't spend a lot of time on it but it concerns the statement of faith that the woman makes in verse 28, "'Lord,' she replied, 'even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs.'"

In this statement the woman is declaring that Jesus ministry to the Israelites is already having an overflow effect to the Gentiles. The dogs under the table are already receiving the benefit of the children's crumbs. As the children of Israel are being fed (something which is happening physically and spiritually in Jesus' ministry) so it is possible for the Gentiles to be fed.

The critical situation taking place is the recognition that Gentiles are receiving a benefit from Jesus' Jewish ministry. And it is the Jewishness of Jesus' ministry and role which is emphasised afresh in the very next story.

The Messiah in Action (vv. 31-37 cf. Isaiah 35:5-6)

Jesus' healing of the deaf and mute man is also a very personal story and I want to begin by focusing on the personal nature of this story. To start with, notice what Jesus does with the man when the crowd bring him to Jesus and beg that Jesus heal him. "[Jesus] took him aside, away from the crowd." This may seem like nothing but Jesus is just about to restore the man's hearing and the noise of an enthusiastic crowd could easily have been overwhelming. Jesus' care for the man is evident.

Jesus' care continues in the way he helps a man who can not hear to understand what he's about to do. "Jesus put his fingers into the man's ears. Then he spat and touched the man's tongue." While perhaps not the hygiene standards that we're used to, Jesus demonstrates in a physical way what healing the man is about to receive.

Jesus then gives a command and the healing takes place. "[Jesus] looked up to heaven and with a deep sigh said to him, 'Ephphatha!' (which means 'Be opened!'). At this, the man's ears were opened, his tongue was loosed and he began to speak plainly." This cry for the man to 'be opened' is probably for the man's whole person to be opened to God's healing and message but it is naturally focused on the current physical need.

This very personal story concludes with the reaction and the response of the crowd, "People were overwhelmed with amazement. 'He has done everything well,' they said. 'He even makes the deaf hear and the mute speak.'"

In one sense this is such a simple and caring personal story that we can just leave it at that. We might almost wonder if this story was put after the preceding because it helps us to feel better to see Jesus caring for people in the way we're used to. However, there is one important aspect of this story, and it is connected to the previous story, which requires us to take a step back again.

We noted in the previous story that Jesus had declared that his ministry was to the Children of Israel and the Syrophenician woman responded that Jesus' feeding of the Israelite children was already resulting in the Gentiles being fed. This story, in turn, clarifies and emphasises the ministry and role which Jesus has.

In verse 32 we're told, "some people brought to [Jesus] a man who was deaf and could hardly talk." It's interesting that the word for "could hardly talk" has the idea of a staccato style of speech impediment. This word is only used twice in the Bible. Once here and the other is in the Greek version of Isaiah 35 verse 6. I'll read Isaiah 35:5-6, "Then will the eyes of the blind be opened and the ears of the deaf unstopped. Then will the lame leap like a deer, and the mute tongue shout for joy. Water will gush forth in the wilderness and streams in the desert."

This passage in Isaiah was regarded as detailing aspects of the ministry of the Messiah and so, by the use of this unique form of muteness being healed, there is a clear identification of Jesus with the promised Messiah.

What is the ministry which Jesus has to the Israelites which is already overflowing in to the Gentiles? It is Jesus' ministry and role as the Jewish Messiah.

The Jews had expected that the coming of their Messiah would mean a rescuing of the Jews from the Gentiles but in these two stories we start to see that the coming of the Jewish Messiah would mean the rescuing of the Jews with the Gentiles.

Conclusion

I mentioned at the start in reference to information about D-Day that if we only focus on the big picture we are at risk of missing the painful sacrifice and personal

account of what went on but that if we only focused on the personal stories then we are at risk of missing the critical nature of an event from the big picture point of view.

This morning we've sought to appreciate the personal nature of these stories: recognising the determination, wit and trust of a mother who wants to have her daughter healed and receives what she asks for; as well as the deep practical care which Jesus shows to a man who is both deaf and practically mute.

We have also sought to take in the bigger picture of the critical situation presented here. We saw that Jesus' uncharacteristically derogatory words to the woman served to bring out of her evidence of her right heart and this was a real example of the teaching he had given previously about being clean or unclean on the inside. Moreover, the Syrophenician woman declared that Jesus ministry of feeding the children of Israel was already resulting in the Gentiles being fed. Finally, in the healing of the deaf and mute man Jesus' identity as the Jewish Messiah is affirmed and thus it is as the Jewish Messiah that the Gentile are being fed and blessed.

Perhaps you're here today and you're worried that you don't have everything in your life in order and that people can see that on the outside? Maybe you're only here because you've been invited but you don't feel that you fit in? Maybe you've done the wrong thing and so now you get sideways glances from others, especially those who seem to have their lives all together? Maybe you feel that 'dog' is the title that fits you? Will you be like the Syrophenician woman and say, "I may not have it all together and I'm an outsider here but I know that you're real and I desperately ask for your help please Jesus. Please just give me a crumb."

You can say that to Jesus and just watch what he can do with such an honest heart. That's what I'm going to pray for us now.

[Prayer to close]