

Proverbs 22:1-2, 8-9, 22-23  
James 2:1-10, 14-17  
Mark 7:24-37

I tried to get Dr Alan Cadwallader, New Testament scholar at ACU, and Anglican priest, to preach today because his PhD is on this exact gospel passage, and he spoke so eloquently on it in this place only a few months ago, but he is in Melbourne this weekend, so... I have tried to recapture some of his fascinating insights along with some words from Bill Loader, priest in WA.

In this gospel passage there are radical shifts. There is a break-through of the gospel to the Gentiles, especially women!

'Dog' is a term used by men about women. It is a derogatory word, a put down.

Mark is written for lower class people. This is the language these people hear all about them... 'dogs' also equals prostitutes. He is calling this unnamed unknown woman with no male accompanying her, a prostitute/whore.

This is the stereotype. This woman has come with no male embedding. We don't know her father, her brother, her husband. She doesn't fit into the structure of things. She shouldn't be here!

Her daughter has an unclean spirit, not surprising because of the sort of woman she is!

She breaks into the four walls of a house where an honourable Jewish man is, Jesus of Nazareth. This, a dishonourable woman, throws herself at Jesus' feet – in supplication is it? Or more like grabbing his feet, 'Jesus, you ain't going anywhere 'til you give me what I want!' She's tough and tenacious and determined to get what she's come for.

Jesus speaks. His words in Greek are abrasive. He speaks a proverb: 'Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs.'

This is a proverb, spoken by a Jew; it denounces her and her request. Dogs are uncompromisingly unclean to Jews. They are distained. Jesus is seeking to maintain his honour as a honourable Jewish man. She should leave, but she doesn't. His reputation is in grave danger! She is a trained prostitute, a courtesan. Her language is the most polished in Mark's gospel.

Unlike Jesus' harsh words, the woman's reply is very mellifluous. She picks up the agitation, and then calms down using gentle words. She gets rid of patriarchy in her answer. She is answering Jesus from her culture.

'There is a second sort of dog, you know, the ones who are in the house under the table, not outside.'

'Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs.'

Which proverb is going to win? Jesus' or hers?

In Matthew's gospel, the story is domesticated. Here in this passage, Jesus says:

'For saying that, you may go—the demon has left your daughter.'

'Your daughter has been healed... because of this word.'

'... because of this word', in Greek, 'logos'. Elsewhere in the New Testament, logos refers mainly to Jesus. Here, the word, logos, comes from the woman, not Jesus. This is new. The living word comes not only from a woman, but also from an unsavoury one, and a Gentile at that! Something is happening to the gospel here...

The power comes in the second part of Jesus words. 'The demon has left your daughter' he says.

In Matthew, Jesus heals the daughter, in Mark, because of this word spoken by the woman, the daughter has already been healed. The mother heals. The woman speaks the gospel that heals!

Gender, race, morality are gone. That is not how to define the gospel. Jesus has his boundaries broken. Well and truly!

This story in Mark comes between the feeding of 4,000 men, not including women and children, and the feeding of 5,000, including women and children i.e. people.

This story makes the second feeding possible. Jews first, then Greeks – and 12 baskets left over, a significant number for Jews. Then seven baskets left over, an important number for Gentiles.

Mark is interested in a dynamic.

The woman returns to the household where the daughter is. It is not a patriarchal household; a brothel probably, where there is an older and a younger courtesan.

The younger one is healed, and lying on her bed, like Jezebel in Revelations, reclining on the couch; the place where you dine at table, reclining on the couch. No longer crumbs under the table but a meal at the table! Things have changed. Not a word is spoken, but the daughter is empowered.

Mark is interested in the next generation. The child has not said a word. This young woman has entered the arena of men.

Her body is placed at the table, not words but somatic communication.

Jesus is anointed by a woman wordlessly; and this told in memory of her; wordless, somatic, no words just action.

Mark is making an affirmation to his community. Flesh and bloodness are critical to the gospel. He is saying, not just words. Rationality is not at the apex. Share with flesh and blood.

Jesus is where he ought not to be, outside the familiar. He is in the place of women. The Syrophenician woman challenges him to get back out there and preach. He is trying to retreat. Trying to hide. 'He entered a house and did not want anyone to know he was there. Yet he could not escape notice, but a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit immediately heard about him, and she came and bowed down at his feet'.

She has given the gospel to Jesus.

The child expresses what happens between. The story is filled with woman's movement. Filled with somatic stuff. She has moved to come into Jesus space.

And the gospel is spread through us sharing it, us living it, living the word, the good news for all people.

Robin Mann has written a wonderful hymn: 'You were in this place but we never knew.'

The gospel always there.

1. At the dawn of the ages  
You pulled land from the sea  
With your Word You invented  
All we know, all we see  
Creek and desert and forest,  
Red and grey Kangaroo  
You were in this place  
But we never knew.

2. Do we take after Jacob –  
Blind to what lies at hand,  
Needing dreams to inform us  
God is here in this land?  
See him suffering and dying,  
Bread and wine tell the news  
You were in this place  
But we never knew.
  
3. Paintings seen on the rock face  
Footprints left in the sand.  
Campfire next to the river,  
Songs that rise from the land  
Signs that seem so elusive,  
Shadows just out of view.  
You were in this place  
But we never knew.
  
4. Jesus, open our senses  
Help us to see you today  
In the person beside us,  
As we work, as we play.  
While we love you and serve you  
May it never be true:  
You were in this place  
But we never knew.

Jesus doesn't control the gospel. Mark doesn't control the gospel. The end of the gospel is in the community that continues to tell the story – in us.

The story illustrates the new inclusiveness of the gospel. Faced with human need Jesus is persuaded that people matter most. No one can be excluded. All must be given food. None can be treated like dogs. The story celebrates this reality. There are many 'dogs' in our community who know what it is like to be shut out, told to wait, given second best. Calling them cute puppies or 'the blessed poor' does not address the issue, as long as they are treated like dogs. They have been treated as dogs so much so that it had become natural to treat them that way and to ignore their plight and our often naive prejudice - until the Syrophenician woman gives them a voice. Jesus listened to that voice. Those voices are still to be heard, for those with ears to hear. (Loader)

The healing of the deaf and dumb man in 7:31-37 portrays Jesus using the ancient techniques of healing. Matthew must have been embarrassed by such techniques; he removes all such references (15:29-31). It is a simple miracle story that must have circulated at an early date. It is similar to accounts of other healers of the time. In Mark two features stand out. Jesus told the man to keep quiet, but the man did the opposite. Mark is less concerned to chasten the man than to show how the news spread (it could also endanger Jesus).

People declared that Jesus is one who makes the deaf to hear, the dumb to speak. So Gentiles are now acclaiming the fulfilment of biblical prophecy, which saw such healings as evidence of the last times (Isaiah 29:18)!

The other feature is symbolic. Here Jesus heals with spittle. He will do so again in 8:22-26, healing a blind man. The two stories are thus linked. The blind see; the deaf and dumb hear and speak. These are miracles that belong to the end time. They are also images used by Mark to address spiritual deafness and blindness. In the passage we referred to in the introduction, 8:14-21, Jesus challenges the disciples because they fail to see and hear (8:16-18), just as in 4:10-12 outsiders failed to see and hear. Mark places these stories strategically so that they show up the disciples' failure to understand.

It is a common feature in Mark that he portrays the disciples as particularly dense. Whatever his reasons for it, we should have no difficulty appreciating his frustration and challenge. It has been difficult allowing the food of the gospel to be freely there for all. Many times it has been disciples who have least understood the issues as they have uncoupled devotion to God from devotion to people, because they have uncoupled God and people. Then a prejudiced 'god' feeds a prejudiced people.

Source: <http://wwwstaff.murdoch.edu.au/~loader/MkPentecost15.html>

The other scripture readings support this text:

From Proverbs, we hear:

- 9 Those who are generous are blessed,  
for they share their bread with the poor.
- 22 Do not rob the poor because they are poor,  
or crush the afflicted at the gate;
- 23 for the Lord pleads their cause.

Proverbs 22:1-2, 8-9, 22-23

And James:

- 5 Listen, my beloved brothers and sisters. Has not God chosen the poor in the world to be rich in faith and to be heirs of the kingdom that he has promised to those who love him?
- 15 If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food,<sup>16</sup> and one of you says to them, 'Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill', and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that?<sup>17</sup> So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.

James 2:1-10, 14-17