

✠ May the words of my mouth, and the meditation of my heart, be acceptable in your sight O god, my strength and my redeemer.

Today's stories are hugely complicated. They are dense with theology and meaning. And I will carefully try to unpack a small amount of it for you, so bear with me.

Let's begin by stating the obvious.

Today's gospel reading, like most of Mark's gospel, is both confusing, and controversial. Which is exactly what the gospels are supposed to be. Today's stories are healing miracles. One to do with speaking and hearing, and one to do with demon possession. But as is always the case, the emphasis lies not on the healing, but on the dialogue around it. Firstly, a mother comes and pleads with Jesus to free her daughter from a demon, and Jesus says: "Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs."

What on earth is he talking about?

During the time of Jesus, to be called a 'dog' would have been one of the harshest insults possible. Dogs are unclean animals. It was a total denial of humanity. For Jesus to use such an insult is shocking.

In biblical times women were not esteemed. They were typically ignored and otherwise dominated by men. Add to that the fact that this woman is described as a gentile (so not a Jew) of Syro-Phoenician origin. That is, she is from a Roman province that today would encompass all of Lebanon and a significant part of Syria. So: she is a gentile; she is from far away from where Jesus is hanging out; and she is a woman. She is as alien as it gets.

However, this woman has a voice. And she uses it. She answers Jesus saying: "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs."

This woman has got into a sort of theological battle of wits with Jesus.

And, as you probably know very well, there is another group of people who tend to get into verbal sparring matches with Jesus: a Jewish group, exclusively comprised of men, namely, the Pharisees. Unlike this foreign gentile woman however, the Pharisees consistently lose, whereas this "foreign enemy", this *woman*, understands the law and the prophets better than the people of the house of Israel. She has grown a healthy theological mind based purely on the meagre crumbs that have fallen of the table, while, at the same time, those who are seated at the table itself, the Pharisees, but also the disciples, do not get it.

Jesus words about dogs and children are not a literal description, but a parable - a purely fictional narrative, put in a realistic setting, that uses metaphor to highlight and explain a situation that cannot be explained using normal speech.

The setting that we are given is that of a meal. Who is seated at the table? The Jews are. The Jews are already supposed to be in God's kingdom, they are part of God's family, they are God's children who should be fed first.

The woman understands the parable (unlike the Pharisees and the disciples who never seem to get them). And she can take the parable further. She completes it by adding a simple fact. Dogs get the leftovers. Jesus concedes the point and grants her request.

This female outsider displays an exemplary knowledge of God's work in a direct contrast to the male insiders, who consistently fail to grasp his parables. This gospel is creating a contrast between the insiders and the outsiders. Especially when you realise that the wider context of Mark's gospel is all about bread and eating. So what is the point here? Clearly the gentiles are not eating at the table, yet even from the crumbs they seem to have a deeper understanding of God than those who get the whole meal served to them. It is just another way of repeating the irony of the gospels, where it is consistently the deaf who hear the most, and the blind who can see the best.

And that is how we move on to the next story. A deaf and mute man who ends up hearing and speaking clearly.

But we begin to notice something strange, something that is unique to Mark's gospel. Biblical scholars call it the *Messianic Secret*. You've heard it twice in today's story. First when Jesus "entered a house and did not want anyone to know he was there. Yet he could not escape notice." And then again when "Jesus ordered them to tell no one; but the more he ordered them, the more zealously they proclaimed it."

We proclaim gospels, we want to declare the good news from the rooftops, yet Jesus underlines a need for secrecy. Jesus doesn't want to be known as a miracle worker. Jesus will not do miracles to prove a point or win arguments, he will not base his authority on signs and wonders. In fact, in Jesus' world, there were plenty of miracle workers, healers, and exorcists. Jesus will perform miracles out of compassion, and human solidarity. But, as the story about this mother shows, this requires trust, or faith. Trust heals people. Jesus' miracles are always bound up into a relationship between him and the person to be healed. I believe this is why Jesus doesn't want people to tell. He is afraid of misunderstanding.

The Messiah that the Jews were waiting for was a militant one, someone who would overthrow the Romans with a display of power. That particular baggage was not one that the gentiles carried. Perhaps that is why they can more readily accept Jesus' message. But this is also why any display of power is not one that Jesus wants to have widely known. The change that Jesus teaches us to pray for, that it shall be "On earth,

as it is in heaven", will not come through power and force; it does not come through intervention from the sky. It comes instead through trust and relationship; it must come, as we heard last week, from the human heart. **Amen.**