

Our gospel reading today contains two very different stories but they both bring us right back to that question of encounters with God, this time through Jesus, and what that means to us. This passage immediately follows last week's gospel reading when we came across Jesus warning us away from religious practices, in this case it was the rules about washing hands, and encouraging us to concentrate on our hearts, and to love God.

The first of this week's two stories is perhaps one of the most controversial stories in the whole of the gospels as Jesus appears to, initially anyway, refuse to help this Syrophenician woman. Because of that some people have concluded that Jesus was a racist, as the reason he refused her help was that she wasn't Jewish. But that really does misunderstand what is going on here.

You see last week we were in Jewish territory. Jesus had been teaching and healing the Jewish community, and, as he did from time to time, he tried to put his own wellbeing, and that of his disciples first, and went off in search of some peace and quiet. And he decided that the best way to do that was to enter a Gentile territory, which is what Tyre was. "He went into a house and didn't want anyone to know he was there."

Now, I'm pretty sure that some times when he adopted a similar plan, it worked, and he managed to stay somewhere in secret, and was not disturbed, and he would have had the time he wanted to pray, and to teach his disciples. But here he was spotted by this woman whose little daughter had an unclean or evil spirit. And, not surprisingly in Tyre, the woman was not Jewish.

Should that have mattered? Well yes actually. In Matthew's recording of the same incident the woman refers to Jesus as Son of David. Now, Son of David, is a Messianic title – a title that reminds us that Jesus is the promised Messiah, and the promised Messiah's purpose was to be the fulfilment of the Old Testament prophecies to the Jewish people. It was actually never part of Jesus' job to teach, and heal, Gentiles. The fact that he did from time to time extend what he was doing to include some of the Gentiles was, if you like, a bit of a bonus for the Gentiles.

It was not that the Good News of the Kingdom of God was not there for the Gentiles; it was that there was an order that had been laid down, and that order was that first the Good News would be shared with the chosen people, the Jewish nation, and afterwards to the Gentiles. But the Gentiles were never going to be left out.

So how does that help us with understanding this story in Mark's gospel. Well, after the woman had begged Jesus to help her daughter he came back with this very strange response – which as I said, some people choose to interpret in an unhelpful way. "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."

So first, the children represent the people of Israel, the chosen Jewish nation. Now, there was no love lost between the Jews and the Gentiles, and the Jews would often refer to the Gentiles as, dogs. So, what Jesus is actually saying is, first I am going to feed the Jewish people, but at least for now, I am not supposed to be feeding the Gentiles, and for me to start feeding the Gentiles instead of feeding the Jews is not fair.

Persistence.

"Lord," she replied, "even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." This woman, desperate for Jesus to help her daughter, is not going to take that response lying down. But let's think about this response. This Gentile woman, living in an almost totally Gentile area, has clearly heard of Jesus, and she understands what he could do for her. She clearly senses his presence, who he is, what he can do. There is no way that Jesus can be expected to know that she has this amazing faith in him and his father God?

Yet she seems to understand. Yes, she somehow knows that he is there primarily for the Jewish people, but by turning his words back on him, she is questioning whether what he is saying is fair. And that is enough for Jesus to realise that she does have faith, she does believe in him, and because she was prepared to fight her corner he gives her what she wants, and the demon leaves her daughter.

So Jesus wasn't doing anything wrong; he wasn't being unfair to someone of a different race – he was doing the job that he had been given – and he recognised persistence when he saw it and rewarded it.

Being persistent in our prayer – and that is the equivalent today to that Syrophenician woman not giving up – is something that we are encouraged to be by the bible itself. I said earlier in the year that I wanted us to become more of a praying church, and I have to be honest, I am still trying to work out how we should do that. But an anniversary this last week has fired my enthusiasm again for achieving that, and it really does remain one of my top priorities for us a church.

Last Wednesday was the 25th anniversary of the first prayer room being set up by the 24/7 prayer movement. For those of you who don't know anything about the 24/7 prayer movement – and I must admit that my knowledge is all to do with reading about it rather than experiencing it – the organisation does exactly what it says on the tin. Initially at least, its prime focus was to set up prayer rooms where there would be constant prayer going on, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. The organisation has expanded somewhat since those early days when the first prayer room was set up by a group of students with the aim of having constant prayer for a month.

One of the recent developments of the 24/7 prayer movement is the daily prayer app called Lectio 365, and on Wednesday a lady called Carla Harding who has been leading the prayers this week, wrote this.

“I was 18 when that first prayer room began, and I was terrified of joining in because I found private prayer deeply difficult. When I was finally persuaded to step into the prayer room, it was nothing like I'd expected. The first thing I remember was the smell - the odour of students praying through the night wasn't quite the prayer aroma I'd been expecting! The second thing I noticed was the riot of colour: we were learning to talk with God through writing, art, sculpture, scripture, music, movement and more - and it was beautiful. The third thing that struck me was the overwhelming presence of God. As our community had prayed persistently, stationing ourselves like “Watchmen on the walls” of our city, one month became 3 and our hunger for and awareness of God's presence expanded.”

That reference to “Watchmen on the Walls” refers to an extract from Isaiah 62:

I've posted watchmen on your walls, Jerusalem.

Day and night they keep at it, praying, calling out,
reminding God to remember.

They are to give him no peace until he does what he said,
until he makes Jerusalem famous as the City of Praise.

Persistence in Prayer.

What this has inspired me to do is to re-read the book written by Pete Greig who founded the 24/7 prayer movement, called Red moon rising, which tells its story. But it has also inspired me to read another book on a similar theme called, “The Lord of the Ring” which is a biography of a man called Count Zinzendorf who founded the Moravian church. Now, I know two things about the Moravian

church, before I read the book. First they held a prayer meeting in the German village of Herrnhut, which lasted over a hundred years, and second, it was attending a Moravian worship meeting that inspired John Wesley to change his whole approach to Christianity and led to him founding the Methodist church. So I hope to use these books as a starting point to work with you to build our praying church that I feel called to build. If anyone else fancies reading either of these books either take down the details later, or wait for me to read them and I will lend them to you.

But in the meantime, praying as individuals, in the privacy of our own homes, remain really important. And it is the second story in our gospel reading that emphasises that. Jesus was back in a Jewish territory, in Decapolis when this happened. The last time Jesus was in this area was when he cast out a demon from a man by sending it into a herd of pigs who ran down the hill and drowned in the sea. And the people around asked him to leave because they were afraid of him really, and the healed man wanted to go with Jesus, but Jesus told him to stay there. So it sounds to me that by staying there he had convinced the locals that Jesus was not someone to be afraid of and they were now welcoming him as a crowd had gathered. And the crowd brought a deaf man with an impediment of speech to be healed. But note what Jesus did then. He took him aside in private, and then went through that rather unpleasant sounding healing process – although I should point out that there was a general belief in those days that saliva had healing properties.

Jesus wanted to talk to the man, to heal the man, in private. Yes there was, and is, a time when we should be relating to God very publicly, all together, but clearly there was, and so therefore there still is, a time when we talk to God in private. And I don't know about you, but quite often that can be really hard. How often do I find myself starting to pray through something and I suddenly realise that I am thinking about something completely different. How the human brain can go from praying for someone who is ill to, I don't know, thinking about what I'm going to have for lunch, is one of the hard to understand miracle of life. But that is not to say we should not be persistent in our private prayer.

So two stories which I think help us in our prayer life, and I encourage you, this week, to revisit those stories, and think about how they can affect your prayer life. You have probably noticed that we have started to reproduce the main reading which I am preaching on in our noticesheet so do take your noticesheet home, look at the gospel reading, and then use your noticesheet as a guide to some of the things that you pray for this week. That way we are starting to pray our private prayers in a more co-ordinated way – the first step, I hope, to becoming that praying church that I have been talking about.

Amen