

23rd Sunday in Ordinary Time

05.09.2021
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Introduction

For years I was troubled by this week's lectionary text. Then I listened to a lecture on Greek grammar, a lecture that used this text as a linguistic example. Now I love it; and more, I love the Syrophonecian woman. I wish there was a feast day assigned to her. *The Woman who challenged Jesus*, it could be called. She is the site of a conversion, but it's not hers.

Perhaps as a way of entering into this week's reading, it might be worthwhile remembering a time when someone said something that led to you changing — your opinion, behaviour, language, imagination. Often such experiences don't come in convenient packages. The person who challenged you might have been upset, or shouting, or in pain. They might have flung your own words back at you in a way that was both true and difficult to accept. Recall this experience, go into it, remember your initial responses, and remember whatever it was that helped you absorb their message, whether immediately or eventually.

Then, with that memory — that blessed memory — read this week's gospel text.

Text

Mark 7:24-37

From there he set out and went away to the region of Tyre. 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. Now the woman was a Gentile, of Syrophenician origin. She begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter. He said to her, "Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." But she answered him, "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." Then he said to her, "For saying that, you may go—the demon has left your daughter." So she went home, found the child lying on the bed, and the demon gone.

Then he returned from the region of Tyre, and went by way of Sidon towards the Sea of Galilee, in the region of the Decapolis. They brought to him a deaf man who had an impediment in his speech; and they begged him to lay his hand on him. He took him aside in private, away from the crowd, and put his fingers into his ears,

and he spat and touched his tongue. Then looking up to heaven, he sighed and said to him, “Ephphatha,” that is, “Be opened.” And immediately his ears were opened, his tongue was released, and he spoke plainly. Then Jesus ordered them to tell no one; but the more he ordered them, the more zealously they proclaimed it. They were astounded beyond measure, saying, “He has done everything well; he even makes the deaf to hear and the mute to speak.”

Comment

Repentance is a fine word, and one that, perhaps, could do with reinvigoration in the minds of anyone who’s tired of it. The word — a translation of the Greek *metanoia* — means to change your mind, or change your direction. Repentance has nothing to do with feeling sorry, or weeping in public, or promises to do better. Those things might help. Those things might even be true. But repentance means a change: of mind, of direction, of action. It’s almost physical in its imagination. Repentance is as repentance does.

Mark’s gospel has been divided into five parts by literary analysts:

- 1/ the opening in the desert (1:1–1:13)
- 2/ the ministry in Galilee (1:14–8:30)
- 3/ the journey to Jerusalem (8:31–10:52)
- 4/ the events in Jerusalem (11:1–15:47)
- 5/ the tomb (16:1–8; 9–20)

Our reading this week comes from the end of section two. This second section — the ministry in Galilee — had initially been marked by powerful and positive responses to Jesus and his message. However, as that section progresses, the responses are more subtle. It is often people on the margins — and here we see gentiles particularly — who are responding with courage, while the followers of Jesus become less insightful, more prone to misunderstanding, even resistance. This includes the disciples. The gospel text is leaning into one of its most challenging messages about human belonging: the borders around your identity group may need to be queried.

Even more challenging, the first half of this week’s gospel reading challenges the imagination of perfection projected onto Jesus.

He has arrived at Tyre, and seems exhausted. Fair enough, he’s a public person under huge demand. However, word of his works has spread, even to Tyre, and a Syrophonecian woman in that region comes searching for him. There’s a devil in my daughter, she says. Devils and demons are part of the entire schema of Mark’s gospel — they’re everywhere. In this gospel, they speak, and they can perceive where others fail.

The woman asks Jesus for this miracle. Jesus’ reply stings:

“Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs”.

I know many people who do not like preaching from this text because it’s uncomfortable. I know still others who think it’s a joke, or who go to great lengths to prove that Jesus couldn’t be saying something misogynistic or xenophobic here,

because to consider this would be to consider something troublesome about the character of Jesus.

The bible is sometimes a troublesome thing to the practice of religion. It is inconvenient, and it causes conflict in us as we try to wrestle with it. Often our imagination about how to read the bible is far more tame than the bible itself. The bible needs no defending from itself. What it does need defending from is, perhaps, us; and our tendencies to wrestle the bible into conveniences that it rarely keeps.

The woman is not daunted by Jesus' reply, even if many of us are. "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs" she says.

The Greek can be useful here. In Greek, you can add a suffix at the end of a word to make it diminutive. An example from Irish is a word for dog — *madra* — where, if you add the suffix *ín* to it, becomes a word for puppy: *maidrín*. This can be considered as a dynamic in this week's text. Jesus says to her: "you cannot feed the children's crumbs to the *little* dogs". She replies: "Sir, even the *little* dogs eat the *little* crumbs of the *little* children". In Greek, the repeated sound is *ion*. Her reply to Jesus has three words all ending with the same syllable: *ion, ion, ion*. She's almost mocking him, but from a position of being treated as an underdog. She isn't abusing her power, she's mocking the power that's abusing her. Even in this place, where her nationality is being insulted, she's uncowed. Jesus is aiming down, and she's able to give it all back. She shocks Jesus with her capacity to do this.

Jesus changes his mind, he changes his actions. He says to her: *For saying that you may go*. Everything will be restored. Nobody else in any other gospel, no woman, no man, no person of any religion or any political affiliation is praised because of their words. Just this Syrophonecian woman. She is the patron saint of standing up to Jesus. She deserves her own feast day. Sometimes some of us are in a situation like hers: we need to stand up to power. Other times some of us are in a situation like Jesus: we're exhausted, and in exhaustion our prejudices emerge. Whichever side of this conflict we find ourselves in, it is useful to remember this feast day, that repentance is as repentance does.

The second half of this week's text continues with experiences in gentile regions. Jesus, who is facing increasing hostility from his own, finds recognition and welcome in the Decapolis, the home to which he'd instructed the Gerasene man (the man who had had the Legion in him in Mark 5) to return.

Unexpected things come from unexpected places. Jesus confronts himself by the quick words of a Syrophonecian woman. Jesus is welcomed in a place that he might have otherwise rejected. This is the complication of the gospel's call: to not let our thoughts about a people or a place get in the way of our thoughts being redeemed, repented, reconciled.

Response

Often I hope that challenges to me can come in moments where I won't feel exposed or embarrassed. I hope that critiques can be in private and that they'll take all my patterns of shame into account.

Challenges rarely come so conveniently, but challenges are important, whether they're convenient or not.

You may wish to take the prompt from this week's introduction to the text — to recall a time when someone's challenge to you changed you — and share it with some trusted others, considering especially your own techniques for resisting a challenge because you haven't liked how it's come. Let us not resist a challenge, friends. Let us find techniques for learning and repenting.

The other side of this is, perhaps, an invitation to those of us who think that we can say what we want, when we want, how we want. There's a challenge there too: is this practice a challenge of power, or an abuse of it?

Prayer

Jesus of Nazareth.
when you met
the woman of Syrophonecia,
you called her a little dog
but that didn't stop her.
Little dogs need little crumbs,
she said,
and you listened,
repented,
and praised her for her words.

We praise her words too,
and ask that we can speak like her
and listen like you.
Because this is the gift of
resilience
and repentance.
This just might save us.

Amen.

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