

Radical Response to a Radical Diagnosis

Mark 7:24-37

BPC – 5pm – 19/3/2023

Did you hear the story of Paul Curtis? Paul fell off a ladder while cleaning his gutters and hurt his neck. He went to hospital and after a brief check-over was sent home with Panadol. As his pain persisted for another few days we returned to hospital, an x-ray was taken, and he was told the paracetamol wouldn't fix the problem because his neck was broken!

We know it is dangerous and potentially devastating to get the diagnosis wrong! How many times have we gone through this over the last few years: is it just a cough or is it covid?! Is it a cold or is it covid? Do you need a tissue or a mask and 14 days away from me please!

But it also equally, if not more dangerous and devastating to get the diagnosis right, but the wrong course of action. Consider 82-year old, Austrian lady, Mary. Just last year Mary had a serious infection in her leg which, after several failed treatments needed to be amputated. The surgery was scheduled and successful. All was well until two days later when it was Mary who noticed the wrong had been removed!

Last week in Mark 7:1-23 Jesus gave us the diagnosis we all need to hear. In his conversation with the religious leaders over the issues of defilement and purity before God, over what will lead us into the good life of cleanliness and flourishing in relationship with God, Jesus said the issue was clear.

It was not a matter of what you ate or drank, not what you touched or who you spent time with, but your heart. What comes out of our hearts is the issue and makes us unclean before God. ²³ *All these evil things come from within and defile a person.*

So what will it look like if we accept the radical diagnosis of our hearts? How will we know if we have responded rightly both to the diagnosis and the one who diagnosed us? Well Mark doesn't leave us guessing as we move from the diagnosis to the response Jesus commends in these two events.

In these events there is an inherent warning especially for those of us who are familiar with Jesus, even in agreement with Jesus about the diagnosis and what he offers, but still fails to give the response that Jesus calls for that would see our hearts cured and lead us to the life of flourishing on offer to us.

No doubt there were some clenched fists and angry faces as Jesus finished his conversation with the Pharisees and Scribes. Perhaps this is why in v.24 we see Jesus leave the area. Maybe Jesus was just looking for rest after some intense time with the crowds or maybe he was laying low due to rising tension with Herod. We aren't told why but we are told where.

He heads to the region of Tyre (modern day Lebanon) and in the off-chance your ancient Palestinian geography is not so good, Jesus is making the significant decision to cross the border and leave the land of Israel and head into Gentile territory where he will be for the next 6 months or so.

And while the region of Tyre was not far from Capernaum, it was a big shift in culture and loyalty. Tyre has a long history of conflict with Israel in OT. The first century Jewish Historian Josephus describes the people of Tyre as "notoriously our bitterest enemies."

So it might seem a surprising choice but the whole thing sounds a lot like Elijah in the OT. He too left Israel to go to the same region where he met the widow of Zarephath who provided him bread. And as Jesus enters into Gentile territory he too encounters a Gentile woman.

Jesus has entered a house in v.24 and although wanting some solitude, his reputation precedes him, even among the Gentiles. ²⁵ *Instead, immediately after hearing about him, a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit came and fell at his feet.*

And in v.26 there is a big focus on her non-Jewish identity. She's a Gentile, born in Phoenicia in Syria, which tells you in case it wasn't clear, means she's a Gentile, with a Gentile daughter who has a demon inside of her. And so fresh of his controversy with the Jewish religious leaders about what makes you unclean, Jesus goes to an unclean Gentile area, encounters an unclean Gentile woman, who has a daughter with an unclean spirit.

And why she's come to Jesus is clear: she's heard of him, heard of his power and miracles, no doubt heard of him casting out the legion of demons from the man of Gennesaret in Mark 5, and she comes to Jesus desperate for him to help her daughter.

And she's desperate, she *immediately comes* in v.25, and v.26 *she was asking him to cast the demon out of her daughter*. And you can picture it can't you, it's not as if she walked up and said, "ah Jesus, if it's not too much trouble and you have the time..."

The point is she keeps doing it over and over again (NASB *repeatedly*). And in Matthew's account of this event we see she does it so much that the disciples ask Jesus to send her away.

No doubt she knows that by the standards of the day, by the normal relating between Jews and Gentiles and long history of tension and conflict, she's unclean and unwelcome to approach a devout Jew. But she comes to him all the same, begging him to help her daughter.

But is that all she is? Is she just a desperate parent clinging to any potential chance she can get regardless of where she comes from? Well we find out very quickly as Jesus gives her a very surprising, even shocking reply. What did you think as you heard it read?

²⁷ *He said to her, "Let the children be fed first, because it isn't right to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs."*

What is going on here? Jesus' response seems cold, confusing, confronting, even offensive. Where is Jesus' usual compassion and warmth? As one commentator says, "where is my Jesus and what have you done to him?"

So what do you make of Jesus' reply? This mother comes to him desperate and needy for her little girl and Jesus essentially says should I give the children's food to the dogs?

What Jesus gives her is essentially a parable. Children is a common description for Israel in the OT (1Kings 6:13) and although we might think \$8k cute pet cavoodle, dogs were mainly wild, unclean scavengers, and the term dog had become a derogatory term for Gentiles used by the Jews (Phil 3:2).

And so Jesus says shall I take what is for Israel and give it to the unclean Gentiles? So what do make of Jesus' reply to her?

I think we often really struggle with what Jesus says here because we have this therapeutic view of Jesus. Where he essentially exists purely to meet our needs and make life easy.

But all throughout Mark we've seen Jesus' priority has not been for healing or exorcisms but preaching the Kingdom of God. Jesus is the Messiah, the promised son of David, the one promised to rescue Israel through the prophets. He's on a mission not to make life healthier or easier but actually address the defilement of our hearts and he'll do as through his death and resurrection (Mk 8:31).

And so we are naturally shocked and offended when Jesus responds to this woman in a such a way. But if you can remember back to Mark chapters 4, Jesus said that parables are given intentionally to divide: to give secrets of the kingdom to those with ears to hear, but just riddles to those who don't.

And we see this in her reply. While we hear offense or apathy, she hears opportunity! ²⁸ *But she replied to him, "Lord, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs."*

She hears Jesus say the word *first* in v.27 and thinks there's a chance for me! She understands the parable to be about priority, not exclusion. As Paul says in Romans 1, the gospel is *first to the Jew, then to the Gentile*. Israel holds both a theological and temporal priority of the Messiah's work. But not an exclusive claim on it!

And the woman gets it. In essence she says, yes I know I'm not first in line, I know I have no claim to the Messiah's work, I don't have a seat at the table, I am know I am not worthy, but crumbs do fall off the table so let them fall to me!

And so this unclean Gentile with an unclean daughter with an unclean demon in her, shows profound insight into Jesus' identity and mission and does so with deep humility that is in stark contrast to the Jewish leaders who hate and reject Jesus.

And so she is a model of faith commended by Jesus. ²⁹ *Then he told her, "Because of this reply, you may go. [Matt 15:28 woman, you have great faith.] The demon has left your daughter."* ³⁰ *When she went back to her home, she found her child lying on the bed, and the demon was gone.*

And so this Gentile woman understands Israel's messiah more than the Jewish leaders! Her immediate, persistent, and now humble response show her trust in the sufficiency and surplus of Jesus: his provision for Israel is abundant enough to provide to her.

And so salvation through the messiah goes even to a Gentile – anticipating the floodgates that will open as Jesus sends his apostles to all nations to proclaim the Gospel.

But she more than just anticipates the Gentile mission, she is a model of faith: faith that is humble confidence. Humble because she knows she has no merit to stand on. She's knows she is not worthy, knows she is not deserving, she knows her heart is the source of her defile and comes completely reliant on the mercy and willingness of Jesus.

But she does go to him. Her humility meets confidence as she is assertive. Confidence that Jesus is able to provide even for her, confident that Jesus is willing to provide. Faith is humble confidence. And her example is so helpful for us because we often struggle with one or both of those things.

We are a culture that stands on rights. The right to self-define, desperate to assert our autonomy and independence from any external authority, especially religion. And so like the Pharisees as we heard last week, we hear Jesus' diagnosis of the heart and are offended and assume the problem is him.

Or perhaps we just want to protest that we aren't that bad. I'm a pretty good person, even raised in a Christian home. The biggest problem I have are the people or culture around me!

And so inherent in us is this pride that thinks we know better than Jesus. And so this Syrophenician woman models not just accepting the problem of the heart and our own unworthiness, but models the urgency and initiative that must follow as you see your need.

It seems to me that so often the more familiar you are with Jesus and the Gospel, often the more comfortable we become that so often leads to a slow or just indifferent response to Jesus. We say we've heard it all before, we say we get it, even agree, but there is no urgency.

We sit in church week-after-week, even year-after-year but never actually respond to Jesus to repent and believe the good news. Never baptised or profess our faith, never actually coming to Jesus to acknowledge your need for a new heart that he has promised to give you by his Spirit.

And so this wonderful encounter is an opportunity to stop and ask yourself, what stops you from responding to Jesus with the same assertiveness, humility, and confidence as this woman?

And her confidence is worth noticing. Some of us are too proud to accept our unworthiness, while others are so aware of our unworthiness we have no confidence that Jesus will actually embrace us. We think we can't go to Jesus because we know the mistakes we've made and seen the corruption of our hearts.

Well the assurance we need comes in Jesus' next encounter as he continues on his journey in Gentile land. In v.31 Jesus heads to the Sea of Galilee via Sidon, which is a strange way to go, kind of like going to Canberra via Brisbane. But either way he lands in the Decapolis where he meets a man.

But notice this time, unlike the woman who came to Jesus with humble confidence, this man is actually brought to him by others. This man hasn't even heard about Jesus because, v.32, *he is deaf and had difficulty speaking.*

And Jesus' time with him is both personal and compassionate. He takes him away from the crowd in v.33, he puts his fingers in the man's ears, he spits, touches the man's tongue (don't worry it was pre-covid!). It's a deeply personal engagement quite distinct from Jesus' other healings. And why?

Well not because Jesus needed to but because the man needs it. Jesus essentially gives him sign-language anticipating what is about to happen. ³⁴ *Looking up to heaven, he sighed deeply and said to him, "Ephphatha!" (that is, "Be opened!").* ³⁵ *Immediately his ears were opened, his tongue was loosened, and he began to speak clearly.*

Much like the Syrophenician woman's daughter, Jesus needs only to speak and the healing occurs immediately. And the man can now hear and speak though he never asked for it or even knew who Jesus was. But as he no doubt felt relieved and overjoyed, the first words he heard must have surely surprised him as Jesus goes from be open to be quiet in v.36.

The man who can now speak and hear is commanded silence! Perhaps it's not hugely surprising he and others don't do it... The more Jesus calls for silence, the more they speak. This is something we've repeatedly seen from Jesus in the opening chapters of Mark.

How could Jesus expect him to not speak about it? Why would Jesus want it kept secret? What's at stake? Well all throughout Jesus' ministry this command to silence is all about understanding Jesus rightly. He hasn't come to heal and cast out demons but to save sinners.

He's come to be the saviour we need who addresses the heart. He's come to proclaim the kingdom of God and call people to repentance and faith – faith modelled in the woman we just saw but missing at the end of the chapter.

As word spreads Mark tells us their response: ³⁷ *They were extremely astonished and said, "He has done everything well. He even makes the deaf hear and the mute speak."*

What do you make of their response? We've seen the disciples who are close to Jesus but don't understand him. The Pharisees and religious leaders are offended by him and despise him. A Gentile woman fully and humbly embraces him but these people are somewhere in the middle right.

He does all things well they say... It's this classic inoffensive Australian middle ground. While the Syrophenician woman is the model response we need, this crowd is the response we know all too well. It's this standoffish, know a bit about Jesus, he's a good guy, response...

You may have heard about the recent controversy on the news program *The Project*. The presenters gave an awkward apology after a guest on the show, comedian Rueben Kaye, made what was deemed an inappropriate and offensive joke about Jesus.

And people have all had their say about whether it was offensive or not or whether the apology was necessary or not. But what has stood out to me is how many of these journalists and people commenting on the whole thing are so sure of what Jesus would have thought about it.

Or take Dave Hughes as an example. Dave was part of the show over a decade ago and following the controversy on the show, he tells of how he was approached while at Bondi beach and asked if he was against Jesus too.

And Dave talked about the great lengths he had to go to, to convince this man he too was a Christian. "I told him," says Dave, "I went to a Christian brothers college and I've taken the Eucharist." That is, the Lord's Supper. Doesn't really sound like the faith that Jesus commends does it?

Yet this kind of response is all too familiar for us. Knowing about Jesus, being comfortable with Jesus, but not actually knowing him. No taking his diagnosis seriously, no turning to him in humble confidence but sitting back and make some broad assessments of him... "He does everything well."

As we read their response in v.37 we are meant to be thinking what an understatement! And I think Mark wants us to see the inadequacy of their response as he quotes their conclusion: *He has done everything well. He even makes the deaf hear and the mute speak.*"

They see the wonder of the miracle but do not have the insight into man doing them. Hopefully their words sound familiar to you because unknowingly to them, the crowd use the words the promise of Isaiah 35 that we heard in the first reading.

And Mark has already made that connection for us. In v.32 the man brought to Jesus was described as having *difficulty speaking* – a word that is used nowhere else in the NT but it is used once in the OT (LXX) – in Isaiah 35!

In that passage God promised his people that the day is coming when God himself would show up, in fact we read in v.2, God will show in Lebanon, the region of Tyre, to save and deliver his people.

⁴ *Say to the cowardly: "Be strong; do not fear! Here is your God; vengeance is coming. God's retribution is coming; he will save you."*⁵ *Then the eyes of the blind will be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped.*

⁶ *Then the lame will leap like a deer, and the tongue of the mute will sing for joy,*

God will come says Isaiah, to open blind eyes, open deaf eyes, and the mute – those with *difficulty speaking* – will sing for joy. And so although they have no idea, in their standoffish, Jesus is a nice guy response, the crowd are telling us that the day is here – God has come to save just as he promised.

And so even though the "*he does everything well*" response is familiar to us, clearly we see that falls well short of who Jesus is and what he's come to do – and falls so far short of the faith he calls for.

And so Jesus' command to the man to not speak makes sense. There is nothing helpful about getting a distorted view of Jesus that leads you to any other response than faith.

And hence Jesus' command for silence continues until his death and resurrection then the floodgates open as all people and nations must hear and come to know the crucified yet risen Messiah.

Hear about him and be called to trust him – called to humble confidence that accepts your unworthiness but embraces the greatness and mercy and willingness of Jesus to save you.

As Tim Keller helpfully summarises it: In the Gospel you see you are more wicked than you ever believed but at the same time more loved, accepted, and included than you'd dare to hope."

And so as we see the immense contrast between the confusion of 12 disciples, the hatred of Pharisees, the faith of the Syrophenician woman and the polite middle ground of the crowd, we are being urged by Mark to consider our own response to Jesus' radical diagnosis of the heart.

How are you responding to Jesus? Are you offended? Confused? Holding Back? And I'm pretty certain there would be a similar range of responses here tonight as we've seen in Mark's Gospel.

I imagine some of you might be thinking, I just haven't got enough information to work on... I'm confused.

Yet for others information is not the problem at all. You know all about Jesus, maybe you've been raised in the church, even served on rosters or been part of CU – but you know that your response is more like the standoffish crowd than clinging to Jesus in humble confidence.

And I wonder if this is you tonight? Yes you know all about Jesus, you're impressed by Jesus, see the goodness of Jesus, but you prefer the distant amazement of the crowd rather than the humble dependence that clings to Jesus with all of your life.

Because I think this is where most of us like to sit, especially if we've been around church most of our life. Familiar enough with Jesus enough that we feel like we get it, but distant enough that we never have to change or confront the sin in our heart.

And I think that's where we like to be because that's exactly where I happily sat most of my life as I was raised in the church and completely comfortable with my indifferent and distant response. And it's the common response I see still in our youth group all the time.

And so there is nothing more helpful and important than you can do right now than ask yourself what is holding you back? Why wouldn't you cling to Jesus in humble confidence?

But remember I said that this event not only shows us a response we are all too familiar with, it also assures us that we can turn to God in confidence. Because as Mark points us to the fulfilment of Isaiah 35 – that God himself has come to save. We are left asking, where is the retribution?

Isaiah promised that God would come yes to save, but also to judge. Vengeance is coming, retribution is coming. God will come to save but that will mean judgement. But we haven't seen that have we? Jesus doesn't smite the Pharisees who hate him. Doesn't judge and reject the slow disciples.

And that's because Jesus has come not bring judgement but to bear it. He's come to save by taking the judgement our unclean hearts and sin deserve.

Hebrews 9:²⁷ And just as it is appointed for people to die once—and after this, judgment—²⁸ so also Christ, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time, not to bear sin, but to bring salvation to those who are waiting for him.

You may recall that Mark's Gospel essentially has two halves answering two questions: who is Jesus and why has he come?

And as we approach the middle of Mark we are culminating with clarity on that first question here in this Gentile woman and especially in Peter's confession in Mark 8. Jesus is the Christ, the Messiah, God come to save just as he promised.

And he has come to save through his death and resurrection. So we are safe as we come to him in humble confidence, because he knows our sin of our heart yet has come to bear the judgement we deserve. This is something that will come into clear focus time and time again in the coming passages.

Jesus is the saviour of Jew and Gentile, the saviour that all people need. And so for those of us that have come to Jesus in humble confidence, those of us that have seen our unworthiness and thrown ourselves upon the crucified and risen saviour, there is an important question for us here

As the faith of the Syrophenician woman anticipates the Gospel going to the Gentiles, to all nations, like us tonight, we meet people in v.36 who won't keep quiet about Jesus even though they are told to, and don't even get who Jesus really is and what wonderful a saviour he really is.

They don't even get how great Jesus really is but they won't stop talking about him! And so how much more should we, who have been captured by the beauty of Jesus in his death and resurrection, long to throw open the floodgates for people know come to know Jesus and find salvation in him?

As I read and thought about v.36 this week I couldn't help but see the just tragic irony that people commanded by Jesus to be silent kept on talking, while so many of us, myself included, are prone to silence despite being urged to tell everyone!

And so if their small view of Jesus lead to proclamation, how much should we who know Jesus is the fulfilment of God's plans and purposes in the world, we who know Jesus' death covers over all our sins, we who know Jesus is the risen saviour for all who call on him, proclaim him to all, even the most unlikely of people we probably think could never become Christian...

As John Dickson says, "if there is one Lord to whom all people belong and owe their allegiance, the people of that Lord must promote this reality everywhere."

Has the wonder of salvation so captured our hearts we long for people to behold their God who came to save them by his death? Will we tell them? If Jesus' diagnosis of the human heart is right, then we must be eager that all might meet the one who is not only able but willing to cure it.

What you hold you back from trusting such a saviour?

What would hold you back from proclaiming such a saviour?

Let's pray.