

High St Uniting Church Frankston

Language about God Mark 7:24 - 37 and Ezekiel 16: 1 - 22



Did Jesus really call that woman in Tyre a dog? Did that woman really talk Jesus into healing her daughter with clever rhetoric? People react strongly to this story because the image of Jesus is so contrary to what we expect; he's aloof and prejudiced and almost nasty to this woman. Or is that reaction a big

warning light that we need to read this story a different way. Jesus' character cannot vary from story to story, just as God's character cannot vary. I know Jesus is human and can get tired, and on various occasions he takes, or tries to take, the disciples into secluded places for rest. But if this is just an escape from the crowds, why go all the way to Tyre? If Jesus believes his ministry is to the Jews, why go to Tyre, whose history with Judea makes it almost THE Gentile city? Mark doesn't tell us that Jesus is seeking a rest or an escape, he uses the phrase "set out and went away" which is a phrase with intention. This is Jesus on mission. So, let's take what we know of Jesus - inclusion, compassion, and one who follows the will of God, noting that this story follows his declaration that nothing is unclean - and go with him into the house in Tyre and listen to the story again.

*Jesus finds a place in a friend's house in Tyre and begins to prepare his disciples for this new phase of ministry. A woman of the area, unaccompanied, and so, probably wealthy, comes into the house and, kneeling at Jesus feet, begs for a cure for her daughter. Jesus, testing her, uses a popular proverb to emphasis his call to the Jews first, to see if she was just chasing the visiting miracle man. Her answer, extending the proverb to a shared, respectful reality, demonstrated a faith that was more than just desperation, a faith that Jesus honoured.*

The image we hold of Jesus - and by extension our image of God - needs to colour our reading of scripture, particularly the difficult passages. Let the love of God in Jesus Christ be the lens that you look through to understand a passage or a story.

The other passage that is in today's Lectionary selection - Ezekiel 16, that I touched on earlier - is another example of a difficult passage that leaves us wondering about God, if we do not read it with an already firm image of God. We had a mini revolt in the readers roster, because of the challenging, almost offensive nature of this text; they didn't want to read Ezekiel 16 in church. I'm glad the text wasn't Ezekiel 23! It is easy to get lost in the dramatic, unfair, rude, and negative images of women and wonder if God is misogynistic. Or wonder if God is trying to tell us that women are the problem! A totally unfair assumption when you look through the history stories and see that it is the kings - men - who lead the people astray with foreign idols and worship on the mountains. However, if you begin with the image of the loving God, yearning for the people to hold to the covenant and live by faith and mercy and justice, then you can read these challenging chapters of Ezekiel and Hosea much like the way we read Jesus' parables. You just have to imagine a different beginning; instead of "Thus says God to Jerusalem", imagine "God says Jerusalem is like ...". And the prophecy becomes an allegory; not a hatchet job on

women, but a picture of the relationship between the people and God being like a marriage where one of the parties is unfaithful. It is unfortunate that the prophets didn't reverse their metaphor, even as a balance in a following chapter, and talk about Jerusalem as the unfaithful husband, but we are fighting a male dominated culture.

The image we hold of God needs to colour our reading of scripture, particularly the difficult passages. Let the idea of God as loving Creator be the lens that you look through to understand a passage or story.

And this issue of images and language is much broader than how we read passages of scripture; the image we have of God needs to colour our speech and our actions. The language we use of God is important in shaping our faith and shaping how we present God in our worship.

Some people still grumble about old hymns getting edited with inclusive language; those of us who learnt the hymns in childhood stumble over different words because our memory doesn't match what's on the screen. But holding to the old words infers that we think God is male and only interested in men. But changing the language introduces a new generation to an inclusive God and inclusive worship. The language we use about God must project the image that we hold of God.

Some people are happy to sing hymns and songs about sacrifice and justification and blood of Jesus without considering what those words say to the world; that God is angry and vengeful and had to be mollified with the violent death of Jesus. That is the very opposite message of John's Gospel - God loves the world - and the opposite of Jesus' open, inclusive, and loving ministry.

The language we use about God, and Jesus, must project the image that we hold of God and God's intention in and through Jesus.

And beyond scripture and worship, the idea of images of God points us to our language and actions all week, in our lives, and in the world. Do our lives and our words reflect the image we have of God and Jesus? Are we loving and accepting and inclusive, or are we judgemental and exclusive and gossipy? Can someone look at our lives and listen to our words and recognise something different to the world around us? Do we project an image like the surface reading of Jesus in Tyre - that we have to be talked into helping people? Or do we project the image of God as accessible, understanding, and ready to help? Do we project the image of God as masculine, interested in power and authority like the surface reading of Ezekiel? Or do we project an image of God as beyond mortal, inclusive, and welcoming. It's interesting to see that some people have got together to fund Christian ads for the American football Superbowl this weekend. In a totally different message and language to the usual evangelical push, the tag line to the ads is "Jesus gets us". Language, and the image of God that language conveys, is important.

Images of God and language about God is so very important; not just for how we read scripture or how we worship, but for shaping who are and how we live out our lives as the people of God, ambassadors of Jesus, and representatives of what it means to have faith in our God of love and grace.