

High Street Uniting Church, Frankston
No Borders Mark 7:24 - 37



I know a recent story of a minister who had been procrastinating about putting in paperwork for their holiday, and the church secretary, who was from an Asian background, was asking, again, for the paperwork. The minister replied, “Oh, you’re like a dog with bone!” Feeling offended, the secretary put in a complaint to Presbytery, saying that he had been insulted and demeaned by being called a dog. Cross-cultural misunderstanding: a

common saying in English about behaviour did not translate culturally.

At Assembly in 2009, we were deliberating on the Preamble to the Constitution. The proposal was presented, and we went away in small groups to determine our opinions. As good, Anglo church people, we studied every sentence for grammar and theology, parsed ever verb, and came back with a revised version. At which point the Indigenous delegates took great offence at our treatment of their long considered and consensed words. A cross-cultural misunderstanding. Even though as Bible readers, we are people of story, we had failed to receive this well-crafted story from our Indigenous brothers and sisters, treating it like a legal document.

Over the years I have read many commentaries on these stories from Mark about Jesus in Tyre and Sidon and the Decapolis, and most of them have failed to even consider the cross-cultural aspect. We looked at this reading in February last year as a part of the Women’s Lectionary, and even then, the focus was on gender issues from this culture. But here, Jesus has travelled from Galilee to the region of Tyre, that is, out of Jewish culture into Phoenician culture. Failing to see that, particularly failing to see not just a border crossing but the cultural and religious boundaries that Jesus has crossed, is probably what gives rise to the confusion and complaints that usually come with this reading. And I admit, I am one of those who has been so focussed on the Jesus we know, that I have failed over many years of preaching on this text to see that boundary, or border, crossing and kept getting stuck in trying to address the uncomfortable questions that arise from our cultural point of view:

- Did Jesus just call that woman a dog?
- Did that woman make Jesus change his mind?
- Did she just teach him about race relations?
- Did Jesus really spit on that man?
- Is Mark really that ignorant about geography?

It’s hard to find the gospel – the good news of God’s love in Jesus Christ – if you’re stuck in questions like that. Look instead at where Mark has placed these stories in his unfolding of the Gospel. Straight after hearing Jesus say, “Nothing from outside defiles a person,” we have these stories demonstrating that the lesson includes gender, race, disability, and geography. Instead of difficult, uncomfortable stories from our cultural perspective, we have Jesus on mission showing that the Gospel transcends all borders and boundaries.

In writing to the Corinthians, Paul says, “I have become all things to all people, that I might by all means save some”, and here in these stories of Jesus in Tyre and Sidon and the

Decapolis, we see where he got that attitude from. Jesus became all things to all people to include them in God's grace. Not by diminishing or denying himself, but by widening his embrace. Instead of sticking to the Jewish understanding of filthy street dogs, he embraces the Phoenician understanding of small house dogs. We miss that in our translations; there are two different words in Greek. Instead of the usual word of command for healing, Jesus embraces the deaf man's condition and goes through an elaborate miming, so the man understands what's going on. Instead of the usual prohibition of Gentiles and Jews eating together, Jesus feeds the crowd. I'm surprised there is no account of the disciples complaining at this shocking behaviour, like other times when Jesus stepped out of the boundaries of conventional Jewish living. Instead, we have these wonderful stories from outside the usual Jewish setting of Galilee and Judea. Borders crossed; boundaries eliminated.

As I said in the piece in the newssheet, the Gentiles in the Early Church would have taken these stories in their territory as theirs. They would have seen themselves accepted and included in God's grace and in the communities of faith. Although parts of scripture, particularly Galatians, show that the message of inclusion took a long time to be understood by the Jewish members of the communities, the Gentile members could celebrate that in Jesus there is never that terrible phrase, 'those people'.

But what about now? Have we so adopted Jesus into our culture and our way of thinking that we can no longer see that important truth? After all, we are the Gentiles, welcomed into a multiple millennia old relationship with God. We have no place with God other than through God's grace in Jesus Christ. God, in Christ, has already broken down the borders and crossed all the boundaries to bring us into the embrace of the Gospel, who are we to put boundaries in place and declare some as 'those people', outside God's grace?

These stories of Jesus on mission become an example and template for all of us as we talk about the mission of the church. Jesus stepping across boundaries and accepting people in their culture, means that we can't fall into the trap of only talking to and sharing with people like us. Or, even worse, expecting people we mission with to become like us, as if we are somehow the zenith of God's blessing. While we have a very cross-cultural church, it is too easy to leave culture at that definition; to only think in terms of race or language and thinking we are doing an all-right job, and ignoring all the subcultures; the socio-economic divisions, the generational divisions, and the religious divisions. So many categories of 'those people' to be challenged and eliminated by crossing boundaries, learning culture, and embracing people with the border crossing, boundary breaking love of God in Jesus Christ.