

[Mark 7:24-37](#)

There is a meme on the Internet with these words: ‘You shouldn’t believe everything you read on the Internet.’

It then claims that the quotation is from Abraham Lincoln – think about it!

One area where we should be very careful not to believe everything we read on the Internet is when all and sundry offer commentary on difficult Bible passages. And boy do we have a difficult passage this week. What does Jesus think he’s doing, speaking to the Syro-Phoenician woman like that?

²⁷ ‘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.’

Well, the stupid and arrogant brigade are only too quick to tell you. They say that Jesus was a racist and that even he had to learn how to treat people of other races well from the woman.

Of course, what they’re really saying is, you should all be as enlightened as us!

When you get a difficult passage like this and when you come across Jesus saying strange and apparently disturbing things, the first thing you need to do is study the text very carefully. Jumping to conclusions just based on how it reads in English without checking with specialist biblical scholars is dangerous. So is reading it as if it’s a contemporary incident in our culture.

For one thing, racism as we know it didn’t exist in Jesus’ society. There were forms of prejudice, yes, but not in the way that we shamefully discriminate against another race or a person of different skin colour. Therefore, to assume that Jesus was being racist is a fundamental mistake.

In any case, this comes in a series of chapters in Mark where Jesus is criss-crossing Lake Galilee between Jewish and Gentile populations. He has healed a Gentile like the Gerasene demoniac. In the previous episode which we considered last week, he has brought down the barrier of the Jewish food laws. To make Jesus a racist against the Gentiles beggars belief.

For another, we need to look at translation issues. If we think Jesus is referring to the woman as some kind of feral dog, we are wrong. The word is not that for a wild dog but for a pet dog, a lap dog, a house dog. This story (in its form here in Mark and also in Matthew) is the only time that word is used.

Everywhere else the word for dog is a street dog – but not here.¹

What does this mean? Jesus is painting a rather more endearing picture of a family where the children give scraps to the beloved family dog. It's rather more affectionate than that painted by those who jump in screaming, 'Racism!'

Now granted, it's still provocative in a way because it's not what you expect Jesus to say in response to a request for healing, but that's because what Jesus is doing here is speaking in the form of a riddle. It's designed to elicit a response from the woman, and that's exactly what he gets:

²⁸ 'Lord,' she replied, 'even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs.'

And by the way – did you notice how she said 'the dogs *under the table*'? She had definitely understood Jesus to mean family pets, not wild dogs.

Jesus is saying something like this. My first calling is to take the kingdom of God to Israel, the People of God. I'm not concentrating on the Gentile mission, which comes after that.

Nevertheless, given the woman's faith, he heals her daughter by expelling the demon. Even Jesus with his focussed calling on bringing the message of the kingdom to Israel recognises that faith exists outside Israel's boundaries and on occasions like this he can flex his calling to bring the love of God to this woman and her family.

And having got to that point, I think we can now make a couple of applications from the story to our own lives.

Firstly, are you living out your calling?

Jesus was clear: his priority was to go to 'the lost sheep of Israel.' That was his focus. The good news of God's kingdom had to come first to those whom God had made into his people over many centuries. They were the priority in his calling. For he was the Son of God, which means not only that he was divine, but also that he was the True Israel. He was fulfilling the destiny of Israel. So he had to come to them first.

This determined what he did and where he went. He knew this was his Father's will for him.

Every Christian has a calling. It isn't always to a 'religious job', such as being a minister. It can be to a certain profession or industry. It can be a calling in

family life. It can be something we're called to do in the church or the community. It can be about the use of a particular gift or talent.

If you don't know what yours is, then pray about it. In the meantime, dedicate the gifts and resources you know you have to the service of God, and consider the maxim offered by the spiritual writer Frederick Buechner when he said that vocation was 'where your deep joy meets the world's deep need.'

Once you do have a sense of calling, then the example of Jesus means that it becomes a significant factor in determining what you do and what you leave aside. It helps you when people ask if you will take on a responsibility, because you can consider whether their request matches your calling. If it does, then fine. If not, then the answer is probably 'no.'

Actually, I suspect that many of us need to say 'no' a lot more in order to be able to fulfil our callings. We get more hooked into a human weakness of wanting to please people and remain popular with them than we do following the call of God on our lives.

A few years ago, a very popular book for businesspeople and leaders in society was a title called 'Essentialism' by Greg McKeown. Basically, it's a book that teaches you to say 'no' to everything outside your calling. McKeown says that if you have doubts about whether something is consistent with your calling, then you should say 'no' to it. I wonder whether many of us in the church should listen to him.

Secondly, though, are you flexible about your calling?

I say that, because I think that's what Jesus showed in this story. Yes, his calling was to the people of Israel, but here he was in a place where there was less likelihood of him being able to do that. Tyre was a Gentile town.

So although he's trying to stay low profile and undercover, when the woman discovers his presence and brings her heart-rending request he certainly has the opportunity to meet her need with his divine compassion without adversely affecting his calling.

Therefore, although following our calling is usually pretty decisive, we need to listen to God for those occasions when we need to be flexible rather than rigid.

Jesus homed in on that here as he told his riddle and the woman showed evident faith in her response. When he sees that faith, he acts.

In other words, he knows that God is at work here. The Spirit of God has surely been working in the woman's life, preparing her for what will lead to Jesus' life-saving intervention.

That, then, gives us an idea about when to be flexible about our calling. It's not simply that we have some down time and a gap in our diary so we can fit in one of the people who is regularly badgering us. Instead, it's about discerning the work of the Spirit who is doing kingdom things and making kingdom opportunities available.

One good way of discerning whether we're being called to flex our calling is by consulting trusted friends. If you start to get enquiries and requests from people for your time and what they want are things that go beyond your regular calling as you understand it, then it can be wise to take the details of those approaches to your spouse, or to some wise friends. Let them help you discern an answer to these questions: does this request constitute a reasonable flexing of your calling or will it distract you from your calling?

In **conclusion**, then, when we dig into this story and get beyond the superficial ways of treating it, what we discover here is that the example of Jesus is very practical for us living out our calling, whether he's called us to serve him in the church or in the world.

He wants us to follow our calling with a passion, but also to listen carefully for those occasional diversions from the route when something else is required of us.

As we do this, the kingdom of God will advance.

And that's what we want. Isn't it?

¹ On this and the general thrust of this sermon, see Ian Paul, [*Did the Syrophenician woman in Mark 7 teach Jesus not to be racist?*](#)