

“GRANT US, O LORD, TO TRUST IN YOU WITH ALL OUR HEARTS”

Sunday, September 9, 2018

Lectionary Year B, Proper 18: Mark 7:24-37

“Grant us, O Lord, to trust in you with all our hearts.” So begins today’s Collect: an especially apt prayer, I think, given the Gospel reading we just heard.

This story, of Jesus’ encounter with the Syrophenician woman—with its parallel in Matthew’s Gospel [15:21-28]—has to be one of the most difficult and off-putting episodes in all the Gospels.

If it were possible to push a button, and make this passage “go away,” I think that most of us might be very tempted. Jesus rebuffs, with harsh language, a mother’s urgent plea to help her daughter. He relents, to be sure. But how we get there is hard to bear. It is difficult to trust when things aren’t making sense, isn’t it?

So, what’s really going on in this most challenging of passages? As this is not an easy question, I suppose that I should have a little more compassion for some of my fellow preachers. To be honest with you, though, I’m seriously concerned about an increasingly popular explanation of this story: an explanation that I see as not only unhelpful, but also potentially damaging to us. And to be fully blunt, I have to say that this “explanation,” in my own best assessment, is based on what I have to call a false, misleading, and out-of-context interpretation.

In *any* writing, including the Bible, context is essential. It won’t do to take a small bit, by itself, read into it our own biases and interests, and then say, “That’s what it’s about!” With anything *except* the Bible, such a thing is evidently off-target. Why it’s then OK to do so with the Scriptures is beyond me.

I imagine that a good number of folks here are familiar with the writer, Joseph Conrad. One of my favorite authors. One of his greatest works—perhaps his best known—is the novella, *Heart of Darkness*. Well, suppose that we took a few stray lines from *Heart of Darkness*, and

then told ourselves that what it was really about was—the delightful pleasures of taking a river-boat cruise?

Absurd! Obviously so.

In any writing, including the Bible, we have to take account of the context and the direction of the whole. Point made, and I hope, taken.

I feel that I need to identify—specifically—what I see as the unfortunate, but increasingly all-too-popular interpretation of Mark’s story of the Syrophenician woman. It’s not my purpose to embarrass anyone. But I’m naming it, so we can then move on to something both more accurate and genuinely life-giving.

So, here it is, as I might summarize it: Jesus was either unclear or confused about his mission, and the women here boldly challenges him, so that it becomes in effect a teaching moment—perhaps even a conversion—*for Jesus himself*. Then, having been so taught (or converted), Jesus is no longer unclear (or confused).

We’ll let go, for the time being, that such an explanation is utterly unheard of in *any* of Christianity’s varied historic streams in the past almost two thousand years. It only pops up in the last few decades. That doesn’t bother us too much, though, because we’re pretty comfortable with thinking that we know better, about *everything*, than everyone who has come before us.

But my point, today, is that this way of understanding the text is *impossible*, once we take a look beyond these few verses by themselves; once we read the passage in the context of Mark’s Gospel, as a whole.

Read as a whole, it’s beyond evident that Mark *never* intends to present Jesus as unclear (or confused) about what he was doing. Mark *never* intends to give us a Jesus who needs to be brought to a “next stage” of personal evolution—or “woke” status. And Mark *never* presents

other people as knowing more than Jesus; as needing to teach or challenge him, in order to bring him, somehow, “up to his potential.”

This may be a “Jesus” that we would prefer (sometimes), but it’s not the Jesus that the text gives us. Not remotely.

I have to ask myself: What’s really going on? What’s going on with *us*, that we would get a charge from a way of hearing this text (or *any* text) that puts *us* in the position of knowing more than Jesus knew—of being more evolved or “woke” than he was?

Nothing very healthy at all, to say the least.

And I’d say that it’s the church’s job to give us the Jesus we *need*—not the ones we might prefer.

So, let’s proceed—pull the camera back—and take a look at today’s difficult passage in its broader context:

Mark’s Gospel begins abruptly, covering in a very few verses John the Baptist’s appearance, the baptism of Jesus, and his temptation in the wilderness before launching into the Galilean ministry. Galilee was Jewish territory—and our Lord’s home region. It’s the site of the first major section of Mark. The concluding section of the Gospel takes place, of course, in Jerusalem—*geographically* speaking, the spiritual center of Jewish life and identity. Both in Galilee and in Jerusalem Jesus faced increasing opposition—official opposition from his own tradition’s religious authorities. This will lead to his rejection and death.

But there’s an *in-between* section—in-between Jerusalem and the initial, exclusively Galilean ministry. This is when, in Mark’s story line, our Lord makes a series of what we might call incursions—from Galilee, into other regions, distinctly non-Jewish: in other words, Gentile territory. If we track these travels on a map, they might, at first, look like detours. This is not the case! They’re deliberate departures from “home”; *purposeful incursions* of Jesus into the outside world—the specifically pagan world—before he heads to the Cross. That this is

no accident is made clear by Mark's Gospel, itself, which is very evidently written for a *Gentile* audience.

By the way, the trip to Tyre, where Jesus meets the Syrophenician women, was *not the first* of these incursions, as Mark tells it. Earlier, before this, Jesus crossed the Sea of Galilee (stilling a storm on the way) to go to “the country of the Gerasenes.” This was part of the Decapolis; *Gentile* country. That the demoniac was set free, there, with a “great herd of swine feeding” on the hillside, vividly underscored that this was very far from being a Kosher zone! (See Mark 4:35—5:20.)

Furthermore, even while Jesus was still in Galilee—*before* he made his departures from spiritual home territory—he was already healing Gentiles. Notice, very early on, the description of those who came to Jesus “in great numbers.” In addition to “a great multitude from Galilee...they came to him in great numbers from Judea [and] Jerusalem.” (So far, areas populated by our Lord's fellow-Jews). But the text continues: “and from Idumea, and beyond the Jordan, and the vicinity of Tyre and Sidon.” (3:7-8 [See both NRSV and NASB.]) *These* are all non-Jewish places; not home country. Jesus, at this introductory stage in the narrative, had not yet gone out to their own population centers. But he was already healing Gentiles who came to him.

Throughout the Gospel, here and as it continues, Mark pays close attention to geography, and he will make a point of noting when our Lord goes to boundaries—and *across* boundaries.

It's really quite wonderful all that can be found in the text, if we—especially those who preach, teach, or write—pay attention.

God's redemptive work was *always* meant to reach out to the whole world when “the time was fulfilled,” (Mark 1:15) as was repeatedly emphasized in the Old Testament scriptures. Through Israel, “all the families of the earth” would come to be blessed. (Genesis 12:3) This message was further emphasized in the prophets; in particular, Isaiah—which Jesus knew and loved with a special affection.

[See, for one example, Isaiah 56:3-8; quoted by Jesus in the Cleansing of the Temple. (Mark 11:17, also Matthew 21:13 and Luke 19:46. Note, additionally, that the citation in Mark has the *longer* citation from Isaiah, including the words, “for *all* the nations/peoples.”)]

There are three additional factors to consider, to help us truly engage today’s text—to help us take it to heart, as it was meant to be taken.

First, and regrettably this is disguised in a number of translations: In the entirety of Mark’s Gospel—in its whole course, beginning to end, the Syrophenician woman is the *only* person who directly addresses Jesus as “Lord.” (7:28) That’s something, isn’t it? Perhaps even a decisive tip-off. It makes her much more appropriately seen as someone revealed to be an example of humble, trusting, and persistent faith—in Jesus, as he was (rather than as someone who had to whip him into shape).

Second, as is the case with any written text: We miss, of course, the *tone of voice* and *facial expression*. We feel this as a notable lack in a passage such as ours, where there’s much more going on than what just meets our immediate reading eye. So, it’s even more important to pay real attention to its larger picture, with all it has to give us.

As a side note, I’ll mention that this is why we can often get into trouble with things like e-mail, isn’t it? Our readers can’t see our face or hear our voice. We can’t see or hear them, and respond to any evident confusion or distress on their part right way, on the spot. Good reasons why, if we’ve keyed out a “whopper,” it may be best to wait—maybe even sleep on it, before we click “send”!

And a **Third** factor for us to consider, which will bring us back again to context. Here are the hard words of today’s Scripture, themselves, once more:

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, ‘Lord, even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs.’ (7:27-28)

In a situation with a limited household food supply, it would be evident that we would—and should!—feed our children before we feed our puppy. That’s completely evident.

Yet shortly before today’s episode, Jesus fed the five thousand. (6:30-44) And very shortly after, he feeds the four thousand. (8:1-10) If you’ll pardon the expression, we might say that the passage we’re considering this morning is *sandwiched* between the two stories of miraculous feeding! I believe that this is part of Mark’s point. And setting aside our *own* cultural biases, at least enough to give his text an honest, in-context, good-faith, and open hearing, should make things a good deal clearer for us.

There’s still some mystery—and perhaps a measure of discomfort, too. We’re still not fully sure of all that Jesus was up to in his conversation with this mother in distress; not fully sure of why, exactly, he did things as he did. But the big picture does give us reason “to trust in him with all our heart.”

The Gospel truth is that with him, and from him, there is—and there will be—an inexhaustible supply of Bread. He *has* it to give, and he has the *capacity* to give. There is—and will be—plenty enough for everyone. “The time is fulfilled.” The question is: Will we “be opened,” to receive it?

Before today’s story in the Gospel narrative, Jesus has *already* been healing Gentiles, albeit at home; he has *already* gone out from home, crossing the boundary into foreign places, to heal there, too. And he has *already* just “fed the children,” in miraculous abundance, with plenty left over.

So then: What might all this have to tell us about his encounter with the Syrophenician woman?

First, that it was no accident. It’s full of the whole story’s great purpose. And no, it’s certainly *not* an account of an unclear or confused Jesus somehow having to be challenged, educated, or brought to more “evolved” status. And no, with all due respect to those who may see it so, it’s not even a story of our Lord’s own discernment, in terms of the scope of

his mission. His own actions so far, as Mark sets them down, have already started to make that quite clear, in letters writ fairly large. But today's passage, even with its discomfort, certainly sends that message home—the message of the full scope of Jesus' mission; sends it “home” (wherever and whatever that is for us), once again, in vividness and great power.

And Mark, as he continues from here, will underscore it more and more, as his gospel's great refrain.

So: No matter how “far off” you find yourself, no matter how out-of-bounds you might feel (even rightfully so); no matter how much of an outsider you may be to this whole church-project: Jesus came (and Jesus comes)—with salvation and healing, with gracious summons to enter his realm of life—just for the likes of you. That's what many of us who are already “here” have discovered, in joy, for ourselves. For Christ, the Son of God, there is no “too far” or “too hard.”

Today's episode, with the Gentile woman in such great need, is most likely an *acted-out parable* of Jesus, similar to some of those from the prophets of old, which both *tests* and *teaches*. By this, *the woman herself* was tested—perhaps even in some evident affection—and shown thereby to be an example of faith, both for insiders and outsiders.

Those of us who've been around for a while in the Episcopal Church may recall the classic Prayer of Humble Access, recited before the reception of Holy Communion. (It's still used in Rite I.) Some may find this Prayer an unhelpful relic of the past. I actually find it deeply encouraging. One of its phrases is a spin-off from her words:

“We are not worthy so much as to gather up the crumbs under thy Table.”

The *disciples* of Jesus were tested, as well; challenged to understand the scope of what Christ was doing, more deeply and fully.

Again, from the Prayer:

“But thou art the same Lord who property is always to have mercy.”

And by extension, *we* who hear this Gospel story today are being tested, too. We are being invited to “Trust in our Lord with all our hearts,” even—and *especially*—when things do not yet seem to make full sense.

“Grant us...gracious Lord, so to eat the flesh of thy dear Son Jesus Christ, and drink his blood, that we may evermore dwell in him, and he in us.”

(Book of Common Prayer, page 337)

We often get the order of things spiritually wrong. It’s not, “learn, to the full extent of our personal satisfaction,” and *then* we’ll start to parcel out our trust, usually on some probationary basis. Now, in our human relationships, maybe this is sometimes how it has to be. But with God, we can only really learn when we’ve already begun to trust. “Be opened!” Then receive the gift. That’s how it works. In our faithful discipleship, this is key.

When we’re “on top of the world”—or when we’re still pretty determined to see ourselves as up there—Gospel interpretations which put us in the position of “knowing more than Jesus does” may have their allures. We’re feeling good about ourselves, and we know “what’s what.” Why risk interference? Perhaps we might be very tempted to go with an alternate, innocuous “Jesus” (who isn’t there).

But there are many times, too; many situations, in these vulnerable, hurting lives of ours, when—deep down—we may be given to know that *we need* the Jesus who *knows more than we do*, and who *knows what he’s doing*, and for our good. We need *this* Jesus—who’s very much there.

Furthermore, this is the One, not only with the knowledge we don’t have, but also with the *will* and *competence* to accomplish his good purpose for us. I’ll stress those words: “*His good purpose.*”

To be sure, we may often not understand *what* he’s doing—or *why* he’s doing what he’s doing, and why he’s *not* doing, what he’s not. That can be hard.

There will be plenty of mystery that you and I will have to live with. More times than I would prefer, I'll be stretched; my prior "understandings" probed and challenged. It'll be an adventure, to be sure; a "pilgrim's progress," I should hope.

But by Grace, I will trust this Lord. And I pray that you will, too.

Amen.