

BE OPEN...TO THE CHRIST

Isaiah 35. 4-7a

James 2. 1-10, 14-17

Mark 7. 24-37

I speak to you † in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.
Amen.

Today, I would like to invite you with me on a journey. Our story in the seventh chapter of St Mark's gospel takes us into foreign lands; it allows us to meet two very different people; and it invites us to revisit one of the most fascinating examples of our Lord's ministry. In this journey, we are allowed to enter into the very heart of two people's lives, two people who, not unlike others, have known great suffering; two people who have known isolation and exclusion; two people who know what it is to be desperate and to be at the end of their rope.

As our story opens, Jesus is on the road. He leaves Capernaum in Galilee (where he and his disciples had already been banned from the Jewish synagogues) and ventures up into the vicinity of Tyre, which was some forty miles north-west and on the coast of the Mediterranean Sea. Tyre was well-known.¹ The word Tyre means "the Rock", and this name was given to the city because near the shore, there were two great rocks joined by a 3,000-foot-long ridge. This formed a natural breakwater, and Tyre was one of the great natural harbours of the world from ancient times. Not only did the rocks form a natural breakwater, they also formed a defence; and Tyre was therefore known to be both a famous harbour and a strong fortress.

But Tyre is important as a place in our story for another reason. Tyre was in the territory of Phoenicia, or modern Lebanon; and it was clearly Gentile territory.² The

¹ Herod the Great visited Tyre periodically and built halls, porticoes, temples and marketplaces for the city.

² Josephus wrote that at the outbreak of the Jewish War in 66 C.E. the Tyrians killed and imprisoned many Jews. The significance of the place name is that Jesus enters territory that is not only Gentile but also potentially hostile.

inhabitants of Tyre were bitter enemies of the Jews. It is here that our Lord is approached by a woman who comes asking for help for her daughter. Not only was the woman a Greek; to make matters worse, she was also of Syrophenician origin.

When our Lord replies to the woman's plea for help, he says, 'Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs.' The use of the word 'dogs' here by Jesus has a double meaning. To a Greek, the word 'dog' meant a shameless and audacious woman; and to a Jew, it was equally a term of contempt, used particularly to refer to the Gentiles. But when our Lord replies to the woman, his voice does not imply a rejection of her; when he uses the word for 'dogs', he actually uses a diminutive version of the word that was characterised by affection ('little doggies', if you like). This had a softening effect. Indeed, the Jews of Israel may be first, but they are only first; and many others from the rest of the world (including the Gentiles) will also have the privilege of being fed with the 'Bread of Life'. The Syrophenician woman returns home and finds that her daughter has been healed.

Jesus then leaves Tyre and continues on through Sidon, down to the Sea of Galilee and into the region of the Decapolis,³ a league of free cities characterised by a high level of Greek – and therefore Gentile – culture. It is here in Decapolis that the demon-possessed man who was healed in the fifth chapter of St Mark's gospel had already witnessed so faithfully to what our Lord had done for him;⁴ so we are not surprised to learn that some people bring a man⁵ to Jesus who was born deaf and who can hardly talk. Again, our Lord offers the healing and love of God to this Gentile man, using the famous Aramaic command, 'Eph-pha-tha' ('be opened').

³ Jesus took such a circuitous route possibly to avoid entering Galilee, where Herod Antipas was in power (Mk. 6: 17 – 29) and where many people wanted to take Jesus by force and to make him king (Jn 6. 14 – 15).

⁴ Cf. Mk 5. 20.

⁵ We are not told specifically that the man was a Gentile; however the important point is that the healing occurred in Gentile territory.

Immediately, the man's ears are opened, his tongue is released, and he is able to speak plainly.

In our text from the prophet Isaiah, we heard this morning that a sign of the coming of God's kingdom would be when 'the ears of the deaf (are) unstopped...and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy' (35. 5-6). In order to fully grasp the significance of these words, we need to consider the Jewish idea of *hearing* and *speaking*. For the Jews, hearing was the most important of the six senses, because it was through hearing and speaking that the Covenant was given to the Jews by God. It was Israel who had 'heard'; and the Gentiles were considered to be deaf. For the Jews, it was impossible for the Gentiles to hear the word of God or to sing his praises.

Once more, our Lord challenges this view by accepting the man who was brought to him in Sidon. In commanding the Gentile man to 'be opened', Jesus calls not only the man, but all Gentiles, to be open to the Christ. From now on, the ears of the Gentiles will be opened to the Word of God. The whole world will have the possibility of 'being opened' to the Christ.

This means that the Church has no right to act in exclusive ways. God's kingdom, restoration and liberation are available to all. Just as our Lord reached out and touched those who were excluded, so are we today called to step out of the preferences of our culture. We are called to step across boundaries and to proclaim the gospel of the kingdom; we are called to invite those who suffer to come and receive divine restoration and healing. We are to speak and minister to those who are different; to those who are 'outside' us. These people who are 'different' are not only the migrants whom we have seen on the news recently; they are also people whom we cross every day, here on the island of Guernsey. I wonder, are there people that we can think of this very moment, whom we should be welcoming into our church?

I will close with a story that illustrates the importance of reaching out in welcome to those who are different. There was once a very famous church. Every Sunday, it was fashionable to go there and be seen. People came in their finery. Some of the most important people of the land attended it. The music and the choir were superb, the ordering of the service was of a very high standard, and everything was done to the highest degree of excellence and in the best possible taste. For a number of Sundays, a poorly-dressed and shabby-looking person turned up at the church door, but was always turned away for one reason or another. After a few weeks of trying to get in, the woman sat on the lowest step of the church entrance and prayed to God, 'Lord, why can I not get entrance into this church?' The Lord replied, 'My daughter, how do I know? I've been trying to get into this church for years.'

Amen.