

Cork Scripture Group
Autumn Module 2020

Biblical Perspectives on Justice

Mark 7:42-31

Jesus and the Syrophoenician Woman:
Justice and the Call to Enlarge our Thinking

A Polemical Passage

Mark's account of the encounter between Jesus and an unnamed Syrophenician woman has fascinated and frustrated believers and scholars, almost in equal measure, throughout history. We are fascinated by its jarring portrayal of Jesus' apparent reluctance to heal a young child; we are frustrated by the difficulty of reconciling such a portrait with the image of Jesus consistently presented elsewhere throughout the gospels. All too often, scholars and preachers alike have sought to 'airbrush' out the more jarring and anomalous elements in this passage rather than allowing the text to speak its own powerful message on its own terms.

Regrettably, this powerful encounter is not included among the Gospel readings in our current Sunday Lectionary, perhaps out of some misguided notion that it might reflect badly on Jesus or prove too difficult to interpret. One can only wonder whether those responsible for this omission were trying to save the preacher or the congregation! Whatever their reasons, we as a Church are all the poorer for being denied the opportunity to wrestle with this revealing encounter, to confront the questions it raises and to discover the significant insights it has to offer our modern context. To grapple with this text, we need to first set aside our presumptions and presuppositions about Jesus and be willing to allow it to speak with its own unsettling voice.

The historicity of such an encounter

If we accept the general scholarly consensus that Mark's gospel is the earliest of the four canonical gospels, then Matthew's reframing of the tradition in Matthew 15:21-28 into a considerably tamer account of an encounter between Jesus and a Canaanite woman, suggests that Mark's passage posed as many questions and difficulties for the early Christian community as it does for modern readers. In contrast to the starkness of Mark's account, Matthew's gospel presents a 'softer' and more sympathetic portrayal of the episode: the woman addresses Jesus as 'Son of David' – a title laden with messianic overtones; Jesus explains the rationale of his refusal by stating that 'he was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel' and, perhaps most tellingly, Jesus explicitly acknowledges the woman's faith as the inspiration for healing her daughter.

Many biblical scholars suggest that there are in fact very good reasons for believing that Mark's earlier account reflects the powerful memory of a historical encounter within Jesus' own ministry. The letters of St Paul lay bare the very real tensions that existed concerning table-fellowship between Jewish-Christians and Gentile-Christians in the early Church. It is hard to imagine why the evangelist would attribute to Jesus a position that his own community had almost certainly rejected by the time the gospel came to be written unless it reflected a strong and enduring memory amongst early believers. The story, as it has come down to us, could have been not simply embarrassing to his own mixed community of believers but it could have been potentially detrimental to the unity of the evangelist's own community given its own internal conflicts and tensions on the subject of table-fellowship. The very fact that the evangelist did not adjust the story accordingly, but rather left the inherent difficulties unresolved, argues strongly for its historicity. Such a polemical encounter would have remained a powerful, if somewhat perplexing, memory within the early Jesus community and would not have been easily forgotten. Moreover, biblical and linguistic scholars suggest that several aspects of the grammar in the passage reflect Semitic rather than Greek grammar and may therefore constitute further evidence of the antiquity of the tradition.¹

¹ John Meier includes among his criteria for determining the historicity of gospel episodes the criteria of embarrassment and an Aramaic substratum, both of which are met in Mark 7:24-31. See John P. Meier, "Criteria: How Do We Decide What Comes from Jesus?" *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the historical Jesus* (New York: Doubleday, 1991) 167-95.

Structure as a map to meaning.

Scholars helpfully draw our attention to the fact that the passage is carefully constructed as a concentric chiasm that can be represented as follows:

- a. Jesus' arrival near Tyre and his desire to be alone (24)
- b. The woman approaches (25)
(Parenthetical note on the woman's ethnicity [26a])
- c. The woman's petition. (26b)
- d. Jesus' response (27)
- e. The woman's retort (28)
- d^I. Jesus' second response (29a)
- c^I. The woman's petition is granted (29b)
- b^I. The woman returns home and finds her daughter healed (30)
- a^I. Jesus returns from the region of Tyre (31a)

Such a literary structure typically serves to draw our attention as readers to the central element of the chiasm as the focal point and the hinge of the encounter. The very structure of the passage therefore causes us to suspect that the woman's response, the only words spoken directly by her in the passage, will be critical to any understanding of the episode. Such a suspicion is further strengthened by the fact that Jesus makes explicit reference to the significance of her word or '*logos*'.

An encounter overshadowed by difference

The passage begins with Jesus entering a house and wishing to remain unnoticed. The text gives no details as to whose house it is and the reference is probably best understood in terms of Mark's characteristic use of "house" in his gospel as a place of teaching and

revelation (1:29; 2:1; 3:20; 5:38; 7:17; 9:33). The reference to 'house' alerts us as readers to the possibility that what follows is a form of teaching.

The woman is initially introduced in terms of her need: she is identified, first and foremost, as the mother of a child with an unclean spirit and it is this this initial description of her plight that shapes and colours our emotional response as readers to the entire episode. We immediately empathize with the desperation of her plight as she pleads for the life of her sick daughter. The immediacy of her coming to Jesus upon hearing of his presence in the region captures both the urgency and desperation of her situation. Here, it is the woman, not Jesus, who takes the initiative.

The evangelist deliberately goes to great lengths to identify the woman in both cultural and religious terms even though this means distorting the chiasmic structure of the episode he has so carefully constructed. She is a Gentile of Syrophenician origin, that is to say she is both a pagan and a foreigner. From the perspective of the text, as "woman," as "pagan" and as "foreigner" she is in every way possible different to Jesus. The episode unfolds therefore within the context of difference and a clash of identities and cultures.

The actions of this unnamed Syrophenician woman in approaching Jesus mirror exactly the actions of Jairus pleading for his daughter in chapter 5 of Mark's Gospel. His plea we know has been answered, thereby creating a heightened sense of anticipation. Both Jairus and the woman come to Jesus, both bow down at his feet Jesus and both plead for a sick daughter, traditionally regarded as one of the most vulnerable members in ancient mid-Eastern society.

The shocking scandal of Jesus' response.

Jesus' response is both shocking and unexpected. Not only does he refuse to heal the young girl but the manner in which he does so seems both dismissive and derogatory. His refusal is based on a differentiation between the care due to 'children' and to 'dogs.' "Children" is frequently used in the Hebrew Scriptures as an image for, or a reference to, the people of Israel (Exod 4:22; Deut 14:1; Hosea 11:1; etc.). The term "dogs" by contrast occurs in several biblical texts as a term of abuse for Gentiles (1Sam 17:43; 2 Kgs 8:13). Bread is regarded as a synonym for life in many cultures and in this instance is best understood as such. While the use of the term '*first*' leaves open the possibility that there may come a time when more than the 'children' are fed, the simple fact is that, in this instance, the woman cannot wait: her daughter needs help and she needs it now!

Attempts to explain Jesus' refusal.

Few, if any, words of Jesus in the gospels have generated such polemic. How could Jesus, who self-identifies as a man of mercy and who in the gospel has consistently responded to the suffering of others, be so cruel and uncaring, especially towards a sick child? How could he be so obviously prejudiced in his world-view and how could we not have known before now? This passage, after all, occurs almost at the halfway point of the gospel narrative! The history of exegesis and devotion have not been found wanting in their zeal to "soften" and diminish the scandal of Jesus' response and to absolve him of any responsibility or wrongdoing.

- Some have interpreted Jesus' refusal in biographical terms insisting that his response is a reaction to being interrupted when he wanted to be left alone. Yet such an

explanation doesn't account for other examples of Jesus' reaction to being disturbed in similar situations in Mark 1:37 and Mark 6:30-44.

- Other apologists link his harsh refusal to Jesus' earlier rejection by a Gentile community in Mark 5:1-20 and his own advice to his disciples concerning how they should treat those who did not welcome them in Mark 6:11. Yet this explanation raises the equally problematic notion that the Syrophenician woman and her daughter are being made to pay for the actions of others. Despite his many controversies and disputes with the Pharisees and Jewish authorities, Jesus continues to engage them and answers Jairus' plea for 'a little one' in Mark 5:21-43. The undeniable fact is that Jesus' response to the woman offers a "striking contrast with every other healing situation in the Gospel. Only here does the initial request meet with refusal."²
- Other exegetes maintain that Jesus was merely testing the faith of the woman. Yet there is nothing in the text to justify such an inference. In his account of Jesus and a Canaanite woman in Mt 15:21-28, Matthew makes the idea of faith central to his understanding of the episode but Mark makes no such claim. Indeed there is no explicit reference to faith in Mark's account.
- Some scholars have sought to breach the impasse on linguistic grounds stressing that, strictly speaking, Mark uses the diminutive term "puppies" in place of the more generic term meaning "dogs" and claim that such a choice has the effect of softening Jesus' comment from direct insult to condescension. Our moral indignation however

² Sharyn Dowd, *Reading Mark: A Literary and Theological Commentary on the Second Gospel* (Macon, GA: Smyth and Helwys, 2000) 76.

to a sick child being compared to a dog is in no way placated by the use of the term “puppy” particularly given that dogs in general, be they puppies or fully grown, were regarded as scavengers and ritually unclean within Judaism.

- Another attempt to defuse the scandal comes from a historical critical interpretation of the gospel and attributes the tensions portrayed in the episode as reflecting tensions regarding table fellowship in the early Christian community and whether pagan-converts should be allowed to share in table fellowship. While this issue is an obvious concern for the evangelist it does not explain why he presents the episode in such a stark fashion. This passage, as it has come down to us, could in fact have been detrimental to Mark’s own purposes given the latent tensions in his own community. The fact that he does not adjust the passage accordingly suggests that the evangelist deliberately incorporates this encounter because he believed that it had something significant to reveal to us, something that justified the controversy it might well cause within his own community.
- Finally, some scholars propose that the harshness of Jesus’ comments should be understood in the context of the unequal and at times abusive relationship between the city dwellers of Tyre and the Jewish peasants of the surrounding countryside.³ Whilst such a tension may indeed have manifest itself historically in hostility towards the people of Tyre, surely a similar hostility would have been felt towards tax collectors as agents of a foreign power and nonetheless Jesus eats with them and even calls Levi to be his disciple (Mark 2:14). It should also be noted that the gospel

³ Gerd Theissen, *The Gospels in Context: Social and Political History in the Synoptic Tradition*. (Minneapolis, Fortress, 1991) 60-80.

parables that deal with day laborers, debt, resentment towards absentee landlords and exploitative stewards, which might be regarded as reflecting such socio-economic tensions, are completely absent in Mark's Gospel.

The simple fact is that the woman comes to Jesus in the poverty of her powerlessness pleading with him to save her sick daughter. Jesus' refusal has to be seen for what it is: clear evidence of a prejudice that refuses to respond to her plea because of who she is in racial and ethnic terms; she is a 'dog' and not a 'child', an 'outsider' rather than 'a child of the covenant.' Ultimately, we must seek to understand the scandal of Jesus' response rather than simply seeking to airbrush it away.

The Syrophenician Woman's Response

It would be perfectly natural for the woman to be devastated by Jesus' refusal and to be outraged by the manner of his response. It would be understandable if she were to respond by cursing him for his lack of compassion and simply walking away. Yet, incredibly, she does neither. Despite the hurt and the offense she must feel, she refuses to accept that the conversation is over and that no more can be said on the matter. She refuses to give up on her hope of securing a saving word for her daughter.

She maintains a respectful tone addressing Jesus as 'Sir' which would have been important in a culture where the dynamics of honour and shame were deeply rooted. Indeed if you look carefully at her response she does not directly oppose what Jesus has said. Rather than contradicting his crude refusal, she takes the very same elements that Jesus has used in his stinging allegory and re-envisages them according to her own lived experience. "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs" (Mark 7:28). Notice that in her re-

interpretation the “dogs” are now “under the table” and therefore inside the house, thereby transforming the allegory into a domestic and familial scene with all the associations of belonging implicit in such a setting. Whereas Jesus had spoken of bread being thrown to the dogs, implying that the dogs were somewhere outside the house and therefore not part of the household, the woman speaks of the crumbs falling from the table under which the dogs are sitting, inside the house and part of the wider household. We know from ancient literary sources (Plutarch, *Aemilius Paulus* 10,4; Pliny, *Letters* 4,2.3), relief sculptures and vase paintings that the ancient Greeks and Romans kept house dogs as domestic pets, a practice which distinguished them from Jews who regarded dogs as scavengers and ritually unclean.⁴

The Syrophenician woman offers a different perspective, a different way of seeing and understanding the same elements, precisely because her experience in life has been different. She sees and understands the same elements of ‘bread’, ‘children’ and ‘dogs’ in a radically different way because in her cultural world, her lived experience, they have a very different significance and resonance. The woman finds room for her daughter, not by challenging Jesus’ designation of her daughter as a “dog” but rather by reinterpreting that term from the vantage point of her own culture and life experience, and in the process transfigures her daughter’s place in the allegory from that of an “outsider” to that of an “insider.” Her response in no way denies the very real differences that exist between Jesus and herself, between his people and her people. From her cultural perspective, ‘dogs’ may not be regarded as scavengers and may indeed be embraced as domestic pets and part of the household, but they are still not truly members of the household in the way the children

⁴ Sharyn Dowd, *Reading Mark: A Literary and Theological Commentary on the Second Gospel* (Macon, GA: Smyth and Helwys, 2000), 77.

are. They are brought inside, yet they are *under* the table and not *at* the table. She accepts the reality of the differences that distinguish her and her daughter from Jesus but her reconfiguring of the allegory creates a broader sense of shared belonging, even if a dog belongs to the household in a way that is qualitatively different from that of 'children.' In her reconfigured image, **both** 'children' and 'dogs' are now located within the house and belong to the household. In other words, she offers a radically different way of seeing the same reality. The distinctions between 'dogs' and 'children,' between Jew and Gentile, are not denied but both are now subsumed into the larger group that is the household, the household of humanity.

Drawing on her own domestic experience in which household pets benefit from the children's crumbs, the woman's response in no way seeks to deprive the children of their food. She makes no claim on the children's bread. Her request is far more modest; she seeks only the crumbs that fall from the table. Her appeal therefore does not threaten the children's right to their "bread" as Jesus' response seems to infer but seeks only that her daughter be allowed to feed off their crumbs.

The woman instinctively and intuitively seems to understand that grace of its very nature is extravagantly abundant. Her insistence that her daughter receive these crumbs is the expression of a firm conviction that there is more than enough to go round for all, even for little dogs. In many ways her response proclaims the very mystery that the twelve baskets of scraps of food symbolized in the account of the Feeding of the Multitude in Mark 6:43. The crumbs the dogs receive are no longer the result of a deliberate act of the house owner, whom Jesus had portrayed as intentionally throwing the bread to the dogs but rather are

the crumbs that fall naturally from the table and which are a natural and intrinsic part of the very act of a family gathering for a meal at table.

In many ways the woman's response echoes the deeply rooted conviction in the Hebrew Scriptures that a commitment to kinship solidarity should not, and must not, undermine the rights and privileges of those standing outside of any kin-relationship, be they stranger or foreigner (Exod 23:11; Lev 19:9-10; Deut 24:19). Her response actually echoes one of the highest and most noble aspirations of the Jewish law: namely, that mercy and goodness must be shown to all. By finding room for her daughter in the reconfigured allegory, the woman rejects both the exclusivism and the sequential priority implied in Jesus' refusal.

The power invoked by the woman is not based on any right that she can claim but rather on her need and Jesus' capacity to help her. In this sense her response is above all else an appeal to mercy: She counters Jesus' assertion that the dogs ought not to get the children's bread with an assertion that even the dogs can expect the falling breadcrumbs. She believes that Jesus must show her that kind of mercy. Her appeal is an appeal to unbiased mercy – the type of mercy implicit in the falling crumbs. Her intuitive sense is that mercy recognizes no boundaries and is sufficiently abundant for all to enjoy its benefits. Inspired by this conviction she challenges Jesus to discover within himself that which overcomes all the boundaries and barriers that may divide us: namely, our shared humanity. Humanity is the household symbolized in her reconfigured metaphor. The power of mercy invoked by the Syrophenician woman is not based on rights attained through birth, culture or social norms; rather it is based upon the need experienced by "one" and the capacity of the "other" to respond. Is that not the very definition of mercy?

Jesus is forced to rethink his position

Jesus is now faced with a dilemma: a Gentile woman makes her appeal based on the core value of mercy, and in so doing, she challenges Jesus to rise up to a new ethical vision of his own ministry or, at the very least, to rediscover within himself and his own religious heritage the primacy of mercy. This is her contrasting truth: the unwavering conviction that mercy knows no bounds; that mercy, if it is to be truly merciful, must transcend all boundaries. In the process the Syrophenician woman assumes the prophetic mantle of Abraham and Moses who both had similarly debated with God for the sake of others, challenging God to move beyond the demands of justice in order to show mercy (Gen18:22-23; Deut 9:25-29).

The biblical text reveals that Jesus is completely disarmed by the woman's reply. The one who consistently has led throughout the narrative and who has chastised his own disciples for their lack of understanding, here changes his mind and recognizes the woman's position as a saving word (*logos*). Indeed he explicitly attributes this change of heart to the woman's response. A more literal translation of his response reads 'Because of your word [*your logos*], you may go.' The woman's response, her contrasting truth, forces Jesus to recognise the contradictions within his own vision and this ultimately leads to a transformed vision. The illusion of the legitimacy of exclusion is shattered and, if we follow on reading the following chapters in Mark's Gospel we will find Jesus healing a deaf man in the pagan Decapolis region (Mark 7:31-37), feeding the four thousand in a gentile area (8:1-10), including all nations in his vision of the elect (Mark 13:27) and ultimately commissioning the disciples to go out to the whole world without reference to any boundary or distinction (Mark 16:15).

The Syrophenician woman's vision, which stands at the center of the structural chiasm, stands as the defining wisdom of the story. Jesus does not pronounce the miracle but rather simply confirms that the little girl has been cured and explicitly attributes it to the 'logos' or 'Word' of the woman. Her *logos* is recognized as the saving or 'messianic' word that ultimately saves both her daughter and Jesus. Her insistence that mercy knows no bias becomes the saving word that allows Jesus to understand his life and mission in a new and more inclusive way. Her *logos* is the sacred word of the story. Jesus, the one who consistently leads throughout the gospel and calls others to follow him, is presented here as responding to her initiative and understanding. It is surely significant that the woman's response in verse 28 is the only part of the verbal interchange that occurs in the present tense, suggesting perhaps the ongoing and enduring significance of this *logos* beyond the limits of this particular passage.

The principle of mercy, which constitutes the basis of her insistence, becomes the transforming power of the story, both for her daughter who is liberated of the unclean spirit and Jesus who is liberated from culturally appropriated prejudice and unconscious bias. How far Jesus has moved from his original position is highlighted when, for the very first time, he refers to the little girl not as 'little dog' but as "daughter" at the end of the passage in verse 30. His way of seeing and understanding others has been transformed and the girl is now raised to equal status with the "little children" and within this new vision is the recipient of healing on an equal footing as the people of Israel.

Biblical scholars continue to debate whether the historical Jesus pursued an active ministry to Gentiles or not. What is clear is that, subsequent to his encounter with the Syrophenician woman, Mark presents Jesus as engaging in a healing ministry, a miraculous

feeding and, at least implicitly, a teaching ministry, to gentile crowds. All the constitutive elements of a mission to the gentiles are present: they are not simply prefigured; they are realized although their full realization may yet lie in the future. The fact that the evangelist does not record more details of this ministry can be accounted for by the fact that having established Jesus' mission to the gentiles in outline form, the evangelist's attention shifts in Mark 9:31 and his focus moves sharply to the journey to Jerusalem and the cross which will dominate the second half of the gospel narrative.

Despite the existence of a Justa and Berenice tradition in the early church, according to which the Syrophenician woman and her daughter became followers of Jesus, Mark's gospel text offers no basis for believing that the woman or her daughter converted or were expected to. The text simply tells us she went home. The boundaries of difference are overcome but diversity is respected. Change is neither demanded nor expected: rather a space is created where change can take place and new ways of thinking and being can emerge.

Revisiting Jesus' refusal.

Despite our deep unease at Jesus' refusal to heal a little child, the passage reveals an important and deeply human truth: namely that we all carry within us, the vestiges of our own unconscious bias. None of us approach life or the various challenges it sets before us with a completely open mind. Our vision of the world is coloured and influenced by our formation and our lived experience. As Albert Nolan once wrote:

'The complete open mind is a blank mind that can understand nothing at all. We must have some kind of position, some kind of vantage point or perspective, if we are to see and understand anything. A work of art, for example can be seen and appreciated without any presuppositions about what it is supposed to be, but it cannot be seen at all except from a vantage point. It can be viewed from this or that angle, but it cannot be observed from no angle at all.'

One needs some perspective or position if one is to see or understand anything and the only perspective available to us is the one that has been shaped by our lived experience and the ways of thinking and seeing to which we have been exposed. Steve Bevans reminds us that “each of us sees the world through a particular set of lenses”⁵ that is conditioned by our social location and our formation. To imagine that we can have complete objectivity without a perspective or a particular position is an illusion. Every human perspective is, by its very nature, partial and limited. Therefore, in many senses, we should not be completely surprised or scandalised by Jesus’ initial refusal, shocking through it may be to our modern sensibilities. Given the very real historical and cultural tensions that governed the relationship between the people of Israel and the Gentile population of Tyre and Sidon, such a response would not have been entirely unexpected. While traditional Christology may find such a view shocking and distasteful, the unavoidable truth is that, initially at least, Jesus adopts a “restrictionist” approach that dismisses the woman’s request simply because she does not fit his preconceived profile of those whom he regards as the object of his ministry and the intended beneficiaries of the grace he has to offer. His narrow predetermination (at least initially) of who has a legitimate right to expect to be recipient of the grace he has to offer, namely the “children,” the people of Israel, merely reflects the religious and societal culture in which he had been formed.

In his initial refusal to accede to the woman’s plea, it is as though this unconscious bias ‘blinkers’ Jesus vision and blinds him to the desperate plight of the woman: he sees only “a Gentile of Syrophenician origin” (Mark 7:26). The woman’s response however exposes the contradictions between his own self-identification as a man of compassion and healing on the one hand, and his heartless refusal to heal her daughter on the other. This causes him to confront his own unconscious bias and to recognize the woman for who she fundamentally is: “a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit” (Mark 7:25).

⁵ Stephen Bevans, “Letting Go and Speaking Out: a Spirituality of Inculturation” in *The Healing Circle: Essays in Cross-Cultural Mission presented to the Rev. Dr. Claude Marie Barbour* (ed. Stephen Bevans, Eleanor Doidge and Robert Schreiter; Chicago: CCGM, 2000) 133-146, esp. p. 136.

Attributing Jesus' initial refusal to an unconscious or inherited bias by no means absolves him of responsibility. His initial attitude should and must continue to offend our moral sensibilities. The insights of modern psychology do not exonerate Jesus for they insist that whilst our formative experiences do indeed influence us, they do not determine our identity. We remain free to choose and must ultimately be held accountable for our choices. Ultimately Jesus recognizes the truth implicit in the woman's response: namely that any form of exclusion or prejudice are incompatible with mercy, or in the words of Shakespeare, that *'the quality of mercy is not strained.'*

A messianic word from the outside

Whilst the Syrophenician woman initially comes to Jesus seeking a saving word for her daughter, ultimately it is she herself who speaks the saving word within the encounter. Jesus merely announces the miracle and attributes it explicitly to her word or logos. Her response to his refusal, her refusal to allow exclusion to have the final word, her insistence on the legitimacy of her plea and her insistence that mercy must be for all, constitute the defining wisdom of the story. It is she who motivates the move from exclusion to acceptance. By daring to reach across the divide of 'difference' and challenge the legitimacy of his refusal, the situation of both is transformed and enriched: her daughter is healed of the unclean spirit and Jesus is cleansed of the equally unclean spirit of prejudice and exclusion. Indeed one prominent scholar has suggested that this passage "can be read as a moment, when in its very genesis, christology offers us a detail that questions its own powers of normativity as discourse. ... It constitutes a site where the canonical source of christology can be read against itself as a totalizing authority."⁶ The passage challenges us

⁶ Jim Perkinson, "A Canaanite Word in the Logos of Christ or the difference a Syrophenician Woman makes to Jesus" *Semeia* 75 (1996) 61-86), 69.

to continually enlarge and refine our thinking just as Jesus had to do in and through his encounter with the Syrophenician woman. It challenges us to recognize that God's saving word is not confined to any one Church, culture or creed and demands that we be open and attentive to the voice of wisdom even when, and perhaps especially when, that voice questions or challenges the legitimacy of our traditions and our own beliefs.

An Icon for Enlarged Thinking.

In Mark's gospel, it is in and through this encounter with an unnamed Syrophenician woman, more than any other encounter, that Jesus discovers or, perhaps more truthfully, is forced to acknowledge a new way of seeing and understanding himself, his ministry and the world. When he is confronted with the contrasting perspective and distinctive vision of the Syrophenician woman, Jesus is forced to acknowledge the partiality and inadequacy of his own self-understanding and as a consequence to enlarge his thinking. In the process the Syrophenician woman emerges as an icon for enlarged thinking for all believers and she stands as a perpetual warning against what John O' Donohue so powerfully described as 'the blindness of one-sided certainty.' She stands at the heart of Mark's gospel as an eternal reminder that even when we are convinced our program is correct we must do so with a humble realization that our perspective is partial and limited and that there is always more than we can see. We must be always ready to expand our thinking and even our moral convictions. According to Hannah Arendt we enlarge our thinking by:

. . . letting the voices and perspectives of others, especially those with whom we may be in conflict, resonate within ourselves, by allowing them to help us see them, as well as ourselves, from their perspective, and if needed, to readjust our perspectives as we take into account their perspectives. . . . Reversing perspectives may lead us not only to learn something from the other, but also to look afresh at our own traditions and

rediscover their neglected or even forgotten resources. . . . We see what we have not seen before because, in the encounter with the other, we have made space within ourselves not only for the perspective of the other but with the help of the other also for silenced voices within our own tradition.⁷

This is precisely what the Syrophoenician woman does for Jesus in their encounter. Her contrasting truth in which 'children' and 'dogs' are both part of the household and cared for as such and her insistence that mercy brokers no distinctions confront Jesus with the contradictions between his self-identification as a healer and man of compassion and his deliberate exclusion of her daughter from his healing grace. Her word becomes the defining wisdom of the story leading Jesus to discover with her help the silenced voices within his own tradition, namely the primacy of mercy.

Yet, sadly, our Sunday congregations continue to be denied the opportunity to grapple with the story of this remarkable woman and to learn from her saving-word, as Jesus once did. One can only wonder whether those responsible for this omission from the Sunday Lectionary were trying to save the poor preacher or the poor congregation! Whatever their reasons, we as a Church are all the poorer for being denied the chance to wrestle with this intriguing encounter, to confront the questions it raises and to discover the significant insights it has to offer our modern context. Saddest of all, we are denied the opportunity to be challenged to enlarge our own thinking and to discover for ourselves, as Jesus did, that mercy is, as Pope Francis has reminded us, 'God's most powerful word.' It must stand at the heart of our vision of faith and our relationship to others and the world.

⁷ Hannah Arendt, *Between Past and Future: Six Exercises in Political Thought* (New York, Meridian, 1961), 213.