

Readings

Proverbs 22: 1–2, 8–9, 22–23

Psalms 125

James 2: 1–17

Mark 7: 24–37

Sermon

G'day, tonight is an experiment for me. Do I still want to be a part of this—the institution of the Church? Can I still speak Good News with conviction and hope given my experiences in recent years? I am very grateful for Nathan giving me this chance to explore these questions; and for you, South Yarra Baptist Church, for existing as a fringe case of the institutional Church. You are a very special blessing to me tonight. Thank you.

May my spoken word, lead us through the written Word, to encounter the Living Word, even Jesus Christ our Saviour and Governor. Amen.

I have been exploring my own family history for about forty years, since my early to mid teens. In the early days I think I always hoped to find some great person or wonderful event appearing before my eyes as I researched my ancestors. I wanted a king or queen, a baron or member of parliament, a great catastrophe or some heroic action.

What I found was a very ordinary family! Yes, there are a few convicts, but not even a murderer amongst them! There are farmers and labourers, lightermen and innkeepers, police constables and women who looked after the home. This is my family.

Indeed, in recent years, DNA analysis shows that despite all of my ancestors arriving in Australia by 1855, there is not even any Aboriginal ancestry in my tree. I am very white, male, educated, and very ordinary.

In many ways I am the last person who should be preaching this text today.

Even Mark, male and educated as they most likely was, still belonged to an oppressed people—Palestinian Jews living under Roman occupation.

However, what I have slowly learned over the last four decades are the extraordinary stories of the ordinary. The Thames lighterman who brings his family in a tiny ship from London to Australia. The convict who becomes a senior police officer in the early colony. The young, teen-aged woman with an Indian mother who makes her way across half of India before meeting her future husband

—a British soldier like her dead father—and who then moved to Australia and New Zealand. The women who survived birth after birth, burying some of their kids along the way, who lived through extraordinary changes in the world around them. However poorly suited I might be to tell of Good News from today's text, I can at least bring some of that growth in understanding to a text filled with the ordinary becoming extraordinary.

So, what do we have in our Gospel tonight? We find the second pair of a set of healing stories in Mark's gospel. Each of pairs of healings is followed by a feeding story—the Feeding of the Five Thousand in chapter 6, and, at the beginning of chapter 8 after tonight's text, the Feeding of the Four Thousand. Further, the second healing tonight also begins a sequence of four healing stories in this gospel based around deafness and blindness.

Let's look at these stories in more depth.

At the beginning of tonight's Gospel, Jesus has left the Jewish authorities behind with their criticisms around purity, and is in foreign, that is, Gentile, territory. Tyre is an ancient port city, wealthy compared to much of the region. The people of Tyre follow their old ways of life and those of the Greeks and Romans who have governed and settled the area for most of the last four hundred years.

Jesus is in the lands of the impure, the foreigner. He enters a house in a city of wealth as a poor wandering preacher and teacher. He does not look like the rulers, the Romans, though he blends in well with the natives of Tyre—except for the poverty of his clothes. He has stepped away from the ordinary, and is in a liminal space—an inbetween space—a place where transformation is possible.

A woman then invades his space, crowds in where she is not wanted. She is a foreigner to Jesus, though a local in this place. Her role, whether in Palestine or in Tyre or in Rome is to remain silent—to attend to the welfare of her betters. And for good Jews like Jesus, only children and dogs are below her in the fixed hierarchies of their culture.

While the woman bows, acknowledging the hierarchies that bind her in place, she also speaks. Speaks for her daughter like the synagogue leader, Jairus, did in chapter 5. But Jairus was a man, and powerful, this woman has no power except for her own mind, her courage, her willingness to be labelled a whore or a slut for her boldness.

This ordinary, unnamed woman of no power and little account does something extraordinary. She speaks for her daughter who is trapped in the evil of this world—who desperately needs God's Culture to break through that evil and transform her—bring her healing—salvation.

In this liminal, inbetween space in Tyre, an ordinary, unnamed woman of no power and little account speaks up for the least and the last—opens her mouth to argue—speaks truth to power—and, most extraordinarily, is heard. Her words are acknowledged, a life is transformed, and God's Culture breaks into the midst of this world turning the expected hierarchies upside down. A woman teaches a man, a child is granted salvation, the foreigner is heard, God's Culture manifests amongst the dogs.

As an aside, before moving onto the second story, notice what is not said. No mention is made of faith. It is the woman's willingness to speak, the woman's skill in rhetoric, that is rewarded. As profoundly influenced by Paul as Mark is, there is none of our modern interpretation of Paul here. Faith is measured by transformation. Faith is made manifest in lives and systems and cultures changed in this world. Faith is not spoken, rather the overturning of powers and principalities is spoken—faith is lived in the working out of the overturning of this world.

Also, it is critical to remember that this is an ordinary person. She is no body special. She remains unnamed and leaves the story as abruptly as she came.

Jesus then moves on and travels to the Decapolis. With the exception of Damascus, these are cities initially founded as Greek colonies in modern day Jordan and Syria. They are neither Syrian nor Jewish, but Greco-Roman cities. For Jesus, he is still in the territories of the foreigners, the Gentiles, everyone who is not a Jew.

This time Jesus is confronted by a man who is deaf and mute. This man has heard nothing about Jesus and can speak no words of devotion or trust or faith. This man is closed off from God, the One who speaks, and from the world. Being unable to communicate, can he even be called human according to the hierarchies of that day?

Jesus takes this man aside, this foreigner who is barely human, and touches him.

Who here has touched a dead body? Most of us when confronted by such an encounter will choose not to touch. We are squeamish of doing so—even our funerals in this country rarely give the opportunity to touch the cleaned up body of a loved one—though we may do so in private at the mortuary. Double or triple that squeamishness and we are perhaps closer to the reality of a Jewish rabbi in that time touching an unknown Gentile, especially one who is so profoundly impure that he cannot communicate.

In the midst of our Covid crisis, it is as if Jesus took off his face mask and came up to a person suffering from the Delta variant, and kissed that person on the mouth. Contagion is more powerful than any other force in that time for the Jews—just as it seems to be for our governments

today.

Jesus touches this man—in his ears—yuck. But then Jesus spits on the man's tongue!

Just last week we heard the beginning of this chapter in Mark's gospel dealing with the notions of impurity that bind tightly around Second Temple Judaism—that temple that now lies in ruins. As much as we in our modern world tend to hear those words in relationship to modern notions of hygiene—after all we know just how important handwashing is—those words are about the deepest reality in the Judaism of Jesus. Contagion is the most dangerous force facing the People of God. From marrying the foreigner to breaking the laws of God, impurity is an insidious opponent that will worm its way into the lives of God's People and lead them away. Contagion spreads and can spread fast, as we know. Everything must be done to preserve the people of God—why did the revolutionaries want to cast off the Roman rulers? So that an independent Jewish state could be in permanent lockdown against the contagion of the foreigner, the Gentile, the impure.

In Jesus' actions of touching and spitting, he reverses the traditional notion of contagion that is so deeply ingrained in his people's worldview. Mark is declaring that contagion moves from the holy to the unholy and not the other way around. The power of God is that a contagion of life—of transformation, hope, and peace—is more powerful than a contagion of death.

And then Jesus speaks.

Just as God spoke words—one at a time—at creation, and the universe came into being, so Jesus speaks a word and the Culture of God becomes manifest in the deaf and mute man. Jesus says “open”, and the Culture of God opens up in the life of the not quite human, transforming him so that he becomes fully human, one who is blessed and blessing, the image of God.

The contagious actions of Jesus spreads the Culture of God into that place where death ruled and life was pushed to the side. Transformation of hierarchies, of humanity itself, flower open in touch and spit and word.

As a very white, educated male on stolen country, it is not my place to tell you what all this means for you. At best I can help hold up the mirror of this text so that you can see for yourself what it might mean. I can point towards transformation, life, love, hope and peace. I can encourage you to, like Mark asks time and again, open your eyes and ears to where the Culture of God is breaking in already. I can ask you to be ready to journey to places of discomfit and liminality. I can pray that we can all be open to encountering the least and the last—the barely human and the despised—the wounded and those without hope. Maybe in that encounter, the transformation of our hierarchies and our notions of purity will bring life and hope, the Culture of God, into our homes and

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communities, our systems and governments, and into the lives of those whom we encounter. As ordinary as we might be, we don't have to be anything more. Just be willing to speak, to listen, to love, to hope, to be transformed.