



# *Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost*

## *Sermon by Ven Moses Thabethe*



Sunday 5 September 2021

### READINGS

Proverbs 22: 1-2, 8-9, 22-23; Psalm 125; James 2: 1-17; Mark 7: 24-37

## *Ecology – Season of Creation*

In today's lectionary readings as we celebrate the beginning of the Season of Creation, we pause for a moment to explore whether these ancient yet relevant texts speak to us in a time of global ecological crisis and into our need to find a sustainable way of living on a crowded planet with finite resources. I would like to focus our attention on the Gospel Reading outlining Jesus' encounter with the Syrophenician Woman and the healing of the deaf man. Here is the surprising story just to recap:

A woman is begging – literally begging on her knees—for Jesus to heal her child, who has an unclean spirit. She is a Gentile. Jesus, who has said elsewhere in the gospels, 'let the little children come unto me', at first refuses the woman's pleas. In fact, he calls her a dog, which, even in today's Middle East context, is one of the worst insults one can deliver. The woman boldly protests and rebuffs Jesus' statement with an incredible demonstration of faith. Only then does Jesus heal the child. The Apostle Mark, does not seem to depict here a merciful, compassionate Jesus.

So how do we interpret Jesus' surprising reaction to the request of the Syrophenician woman. After all, she comes to him bowed down, in the posture of worship, begging that he cure her daughter of an unclean spirit, something we already know he can easily do. And yet he brushes her off, refusing her request and casting her aside, throwing in an ethnic slur just for good measure.

And the haunting question is, why?

Here's the traditional answer to this question: He is not actually refusing her but rather testing her. That is, the rebuff, the insult, the rejection – these aren't real at all but rather the means by which to test her faith, to see if she really, really believes in him. And, of course, she passes.

The trouble with this interpretation is that a) nothing like it occurs anywhere else in the Gospel of Mark, b) there is no mention of testing in the story (as in Job, for instance), and c) it creates a rather cold-hearted picture of a God who taunts and tests us in our deepest moments of need.

If not this interpretation, then what? Why on earth, that is, would Jesus react to someone in need in such a callous manner? And here is the untraditional answer to this question: Could it be that Jesus had not yet realized the full extent of God's mission or the radical nature of the kingdom he proclaimed.

Of course, this is an uncomfortable position to take on Jesus. Of course, we have been taught from our Catechism days to look upon Jesus as this full-bodied, perfect, and unchangeable man from his birth. But if we are to take Mark's narrative seriously, never mind the incarnational and creedal affirmation that Jesus is fully human as well as fully divine, then perhaps we should not be surprised to see a development in Jesus' own recognition of God's vision for the world. After all, the profoundly inclusive notion of God's kingdom that included everyone – with no exceptions! – was completely and totally mind boggling. (And still is today in our context!) If so – if we can imagine that this woman didn't simply pass a clever test but instead, and as Jesus himself says, demonstrated profound faith – then we might acknowledge that this brave mother actually taught the Teacher and, therefore, might have some things to teach us as well.

Two things in particular stand out. First, she teaches us about the power of the stranger. Newcomers, strangers, people who are different from us – they stretch our perspective and teach us things about themselves, about the world, and about us that we may not have been aware of. So one question might be to ask – whom are we overlooking? Who is a part of our fellowship but does not often participate, does not sit at the center, is not empowered but might have a great deal to teach us?

Second, this woman teaches us about the nature of faith. The woman not only believed in Jesus but also and more importantly believed in herself. From the account of the Gospel story, we can at least say we know for sure that she believed her daughter was worthy of God's attention and Jesus' time. That is, she was convinced that her precious, beloved daughter who was being oppressed by this unclean spirit was absolutely deserving of Jesus' attention and so she was willing to go to great lengths to help her.

And I think that's often the case with faith. It shows itself most fully when exercised on behalf of others. We are not created to be isolated beings but rather find our true selves most deeply in community, in relationship, and when we are advocating for another, particularly in this instance, when we have to advocate for the care of the earth, our home. Like the story in the Gospel, this calls for congregational and personal renewal in the way we interact with the earth and care for it.

This is not the kind of renewal that happens on an fleeting level like figuring out what hymns we want to sing, what programs we most want. Rather, the Gospel challenges us to a process of renewal by looking around us – looking at our households, schools, communities, our environment and the earth – to discern who needs us, what these contexts need from us, and how we might utilize our resources to be their advocates before God, the world and the powers that be in our global governments.

To be sure, there is something right and good about maintaining the health and integrity of the planet--the natural world. But without a larger context for our efforts, confusion and competition will continue to reign, and real change and renewal will never be realised. Without a spiritual context in which to base our concerns about nature, real progress is not made. For example, many people continue to tolerate high levels of toxic pollution as long as it is "not in my backyard." Some people advocate a rejection of all technology as dangerous and harmful, while others embrace it as our salvation. Until we have a better understanding of the role of nature in the context of our lives as spiritual beings who are connected to the natural order – well, the confrontation and debate --and the pollution--will continue.

Ecology (meaning environmental care and awareness) and faith have never been separate concerns. Rather, it is we who are confused by the apparent differences, unable to see the vital, organic unity between the natural order and the presence of God's Spirit in both. It is we who must overcome this

division within ourselves. Only then will effective action begin to flow outward, benefiting our neighbours as well as the earth on which we live.

"O Lord, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth!" (Psalm 8:1). That is to say, how mystical, how alive is this world when seen from with the spiritual eyes of our understanding; when God is revealed as the source and goal of all things, the beginning and the end; when we see all things embedded in the flow of God's providence, wholeness, self-giving, and eternal being; when we see more deeply what it means to say that sacrifice and renewal is the way of life.

When we see the world in this way, we gain a new understanding of the natural order, its use, and our individual relationship with it. Our stewardship of nature is a necessary step in our process of regeneration and renewal. It is not "saving" in itself, but it is part of the journey of salvation; part of responding to God's call to wholeness – the well-being of the entire cosmos, not just the human beings in it. Barack Obama famously used the phrase, 'the audacity of hope' in a keynote address at the 2004 Democratic National Convention: 'Hope in the face of difficulty, hope in the face of uncertainty, the audacity of hope: In the end, that is God's greatest gift to us [...] a belief in things not seen, a belief that there are better days ahead.

It was the audacity of hope which drove the Syrophoenician woman to act as she did, taking every risk imaginable to save her child. A woman on the margins, powerless in the face of this teacher from Galilee, yet she acted with boldness and daring boldness. We are called to practice this boldness in the face of environmental degradation and ecological disasters that characterise our capitalist and consumerist societies

I would like to conclude with the following prayer taken from

Mother Theresa's Meditations from A Simple Path:

*"Dear Lord, the Great Healer, I kneel before You,  
Since every perfect gift must come from You.  
I pray, give skill to my hands,  
clear vision to my mind,  
kindness and meekness to my heart.  
Give me singleness of purpose,  
strength to lift up part of the burden of  
my suffering fellow human being,  
and a true realization of the privilege that is mine.  
Take from my heart all guile and worldliness,  
That with the simple faith of a child,  
I may rely on you."*

Amen