

# Insiders, Outsiders and the Call for God's Grace

Pitt Street Uniting Church, Sunday 28 August 2022

A Reflection by Rev Dr Elenie Poulos

Pentecost 12C

Jeremiah 2: 4-13; Mark 7: 24-35

The video of this reflection can be viewed on You Tube at <https://pittstreetuniting.org.au/spirit/reflections/> The version below is not a transcript, but the script from which the reflector spoke, so there may be some changes of wording.

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Reading Mark's gospel quickly in one sitting, you could be forgiven for thinking that you are reading a Hollywood script for a fast-paced extreme action-horror movie. The action hardly stops.

By the end of chapter 1, we've been introduced to one of the most eccentric characters ever described in literature (even ignoring the clothing and the diet, John the Baptist was a bizarre figure); Jesus is baptised in a dramatic scene where the heavens open, the Spirit flies down like a bird and the voice of God is heard to proclaim him 'son'; and in the space of just two verses he is driven into the wilderness to face temptation by Satan, be with '*the wild beasts*' and receive the care of angels. Then Jesus' public ministry begins, and with just one command, a group of men he'd never met before, quit their jobs and leave their families without so much as a goodbye, to follow him who knows where.

Then there are a series of miracle healings and exorcisms, followed by stories about Jesus behaving badly – mixing with all the wrong people, paying scant regard for the rules of his religion, seeming to deny his family, and telling strange and impossible to understand stories about the kingdom of God to his confused disciples.

And as if that wasn't enough, there's a storm being stilled, demons being cast out of a person and into a herd of pigs which then hurl themselves off a cliff, and a dead girl brought back to life.

Then Jesus gets rejected in his home town; sends his disciples off to do their thing, telling them they can't take anything with them (and by then, they're really regretting their choice); and finally, just before the feeding of the 5000 men and who knows how many women and children, we get the extraordinary story of the execution of John the Baptist, with his head served up on a platter at a mega-party for the rich and powerful.

The day after the feeding of the 5000, Jesus walks on water and continues to heal the countless sick. Then, at the beginning of Chapter 7 (yes, all of this in just 6 short chapters), Mark's Jesus has to deal with his critics – on the attack because Jesus is unconcerned by his disciples breaking the purity code.

It's after this that Jesus travels to the north-west, to Tyre, across the Syrian border from the region that was home to him. And it's here, far away from Jesus' home, that Mark sets yet another story of scandalous behaviour in the encounter between the Palestinian Jew and the gentile woman.

The woman, who is not named, was probably culturally Greek and ethnically Syrian, a foreigner to Jesus: from a different land, different in religion, first language and culture. She was a woman. She should have been at home and not out on her own without a man. Jesus was a poor traveller, but she was probably socially elite and wealthy. She was 'unclean' or 'impure' because of her daughter's illness. Jesus was a religious teacher, not one who should have been in contact with those who would pass on their impurities. She should not have approached him at all, let alone enter a private house and fall to her knees in front of him.

Everything about the woman and her actions was an affront to how things should have been. It's no wonder Jesus responded the way he did. And so we have it – a story which confronts us with the image of a harsh and dismissive Jesus. Not at all consistent with the images of Jesus most of us are used to.

The command to care for the stranger (or 'alien' as it's often translated) occurs many times in the Hebrew Scriptures that Jesus knew so well. And there are many clear warnings about the consequences for failing to do so, like this one from Deuteronomy: "*Cursed be anyone who deprives the alien, the orphan, and the widow of justice*" (27:19a).

So why, when confronted by a begging mother, willing to risk everything to save her daughter, did Jesus dismiss her so harshly and cruelly? He compared her to a dog. His gifts of grace, his practice of God's hospitality of love, were not for outsiders, not for the dogs – they were for the house of Israel. He dismissed her because she was an outsider.

But there was no retreat for this woman who sought healing and inclusion for her beloved daughter. She stood her ground and forced Jesus to engage with her. She and her daughter had a right to the grace of God as much as anyone else, even if it was just the scraps of that grace. In the face of this great truth, Jesus changed his mind.

In verse 29, Jesus said, "*For saying that, you may go – the demon has left your daughter.*" The Greek word translated as "saying" is *logos*, the word we associate more often with the "word of God", the "gospel", Jesus' speaking of the good news. But here, the word of God, the speech that had the power to transform, came from the foreigner, the excluded one. The woman brought the word of God, the *logos*, to Jesus; and as the word of God is what to do, she and Jesus, and her daughter, were transformed by the encounter.

This story forms a pair with the following one in verses 31-37. In keeping with Mark's fast-paced narrative, one verse after his encounter with the Syrophenician woman, he is far on the other side of Galilee, east, in the Greek region of Decapolis. Here he encounters a man who was deaf, brought to him by others for healing.

And again, it is a scandalous story – Jesus breached the purity code by using his own saliva and touching the man, an 'unclean' gentile, in order to heal him.

In the context of Mark's story, Jesus' ministry was never the same after these encounters. Until then, Jesus' ministry had been to Israel alone, but from this point on, the reign of God became a gift of grace for all people.

Let me give you one example to illustrate the 'before and after' effect of these stories.

In chapter 6, Mark gives us one of the great hospitality stories – the feeding of the 5000 men and uncounted women and children in Galilee, a Jewish place and a Jewish crowd. In chapter 8, after Jesus' encounters with the two gentiles, Mark offers another miracle feeding – the feeding of the 4000 set in Decapolis, a cosmopolitan place and gentile crowd. Here a generosity born of Jewish faith became a miracle of hospitality for everyone.

It was the Syrophenician woman who bravely reminded Jesus that there are no outsiders in the household of God. She spoke the word of God to Jesus, and it transformed him and his ministry.

As long as there have been human communities, there have been traditions, practices and rules—social, political, economic, legal and religious—that define groups of people against each other – who is 'in' and who is 'out'. And despite the Christian responsibility to witness to God's inclusive hospitality, Christians all too often excel at exclusion. Sometimes we set it up that way, deliberately or in ignorance, but sometimes we just allow it happen. Familiarity and comfort, unexpected feelings of fear, or the experiences of privilege and power, can lead us to close our doors and make us deaf to those outside calling for, claiming God's grace.

Over the last few years, I've been researching and writing on the politics of religious freedom in Australia. I first became involved in advocating for better protections for religious freedom in Australian law in about 2002. The concern back then was that people from minority religious groups were being discriminated against because of their religion—Muslim women, for example, being spat on and having their hijabs pulled off—and they didn't have adequate protections and recourses in law. Now, the concerns of our Jewish, Muslim, Hindu, Sikh, Buddhist and other neighbours have been sidelined from the public conversation because religious freedom has become a battle between the rights of LGBTIQ+ people and religious groups and organisations, almost exclusively Christian, who want to close their doors to people of diverse genders and sexualities.

Religious freedom used to be a tool for building a more inclusive, more just, less discriminatory and less prejudiced society. It has become a tool of oppression. A small but vocal and, until recently at least, influential Christian Right minority has reframed freedom of religion as 'freedom of belief' where 'belief' refers to a small set of personal morality claims based on flawed readings of the biblical texts, bad theology and feelings of existential stress so deep that they feel the need for 'lifeboats'.

The challenge for us in congregations, churches, schools, service agencies, is first of all, to open ourselves to the word of God that comes to us in the voices of those who have been excluded, in the demands for justice from the margins of our society. Are we ready to hear the word of God from strangers, just like Mark's Jesus did when confronted by the Syrophenician woman?

And then, and this where it counts, are we willing to change our ministry, just like Jesus did?

Will we stand against prejudice of all kinds, from the so-called 'casual' racism, sexism and homophobia that mark so many everyday conversations, to the rules in our communities and institutions designed to identify people as 'in' or 'out', to the systems and structures of our society that support the already privileged at the expense of those who have least?

The Syrophenician woman challenges us to let go our privilege, stop talking, start listening, and do whatever must be done so that others may experience us agents of the radical inclusive love of God.

May the creative and enlivening spirit of God be with you and with our church that we might find the boldness to change so that that all who come near may experience God's hospitality of love, the unconditional embrace that frees us from fear and sets us free to truly live.