

Mark 7.24-37


Jesus is... the one who does everything well

Christ Church Selly Park

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Mark: Who is Jesus? [19]

The famous one

We saw earlier the lengths some celebrities will go to stay hidden from fans and photographers. I rather like  Dustin Hoffman's approach: putting a bag over his head.

In Jesus' day fame was somewhat harder to come by – certainly at the level Jesus knew across the entire region; in the previous chapter the crowds were so huge Jesus could barely eat, and he ended up feeding thousands of them on the hillside.

Why was Jesus so famous? Everyone loved his teaching – well, everyone except the scribes and the Pharisees and the king's advisors – but what the people *really* loved – let's be honest – was the feeding and the healing. Some of them wanted a show, but many of them were simply at rock bottom and were desperate for Jesus to lift them up. We meet two of those today.

Blessing to all nations (24-30)

Our passage begins as Jesus travels **to the vicinity of Tyre** (24). We don't know why he went there – maybe because he was, ahem, *tired*.

Mark tells us Jesus **entered a house and did not want anyone to know it** (24). It sounds like he wanted some peace, having come from a confrontation with the teachers of the law and Pharisees (7.1-23). Before *that* he had walked on water, calmed a storm, and fed 5,000 men. Before *that* he had raised the dead, cast out demons, and healed as many as came to him to be touched.

No wonder he felt exhausted.

It's tempting to read into this passage that Jesus had something like compassion fatigue: like when we are shown *yet another* video tugging at our heartstrings asking for money; like when the charity letters go straight from the letterbox to the recycling...

But that's not what's going on here. Jesus is like us yes, he is fully human; but unlike us the well of his love and compassion did not run dry. I think he simply wanted a breather. Maybe he got one – Mark doesn't tell us how long he stayed there – but before long **a woman heard about him** (25).

Mark goes out of his way to make sure we know this woman was not a Jew. First we're in **the vicinity of Tyre** (24). **Tyre** was a coastal city, rich from trade, and its people were sworn enemies of the Jews. Josephus was a first-century Jewish historian who spent much of his life in Galilee, and he described the people of **Tyre** as '**notoriously our most bitter enemies.**'¹

Second, the woman is described as a **Greek** (26) – which doesn't mean she was from Greece, but that she was *culturally Greek*, rather than Jewish.

§ It's a bit like saying Australia and New Zealand are part of 'the West' – which they are culturally, but most certainly *not* geographically. Unless you're in Fiji I guess.

Third, she was **born in Syrian Phoenicia** (26) – that is, *not* Israel. Mark is telling us his readers, 'Here is a non-Jewish woman who lives in a non-Jewish city and was born in a non-Jewish region.' Do you get the message? This woman was not... *Jewish*. She was a Gentile. Why does that matter? We'll find out.

This woman had a **daughter** (25). Mark uses the same word he used earlier when talking about § Jairus's **little daughter** (5.23), the word Jesus used for the woman who touched his robe (5.34).

This woman was desperate because her **little** girl **was possessed by an impure spirit** (25). She found Jesus, **fell at his feet** (25) and **begged [him] to drive the demon out of her daughter** (26).

I wonder what you think when the New Testament says things like this? As medical science has advanced, it's become common to say that when the Bible says 'demon' we know better that it means a medical condition – something like epilepsy perhaps.

And yet... *four times* in these verses Mark talks about the girl having a **demon** (25, 26, 29, 30) – once on the lips of Jesus himself – and not once when he describes the deaf and mute man. Perhaps Mark wasn't stupid, perhaps she actually had a demon...

§ There's a famous line from the end the film *The Usual Suspects* – does anyone know it? § 'The greatest trick the devil ever pulled was convincing the world he didn't exist.'

CS Lewis put it like this:

§ There are two equal and opposite errors into which our race can fall about the devils. One is to disbelieve in their existence. The other is to believe, and to feel an excessive and unhealthy interest in them.

CS Lewis, The Screwtape Letters, ix

In our Vision & Mission document one of the statements under ‘Sending?’ is this: **Standing Firm** against evil and darkness in the name of Jesus. It tries to capture two things: (1) taking the reality of our battle against the powers of evil seriously, and (2) confidence that we *can* stand firm because of Jesus.

The contrast Mark puts before us almost couldn’t be greater. A demon has been oppressing a poor little girl, driving her mother to her wits’ end (26). There was simply nothing she could do about it; she was powerless, helpless, desperate.

But not Jesus. Whereas the mother could do nothing to help her **little daughter** (25), Jesus didn’t even need to *be there* to make her whole again. He didn’t even need to *speak* to the demon to cast it out: **‘You may go,’** he said to the woman, **‘the demon has left your daughter’** (29). That was all. She went – and it had (30).

Compared to us, the forces of evil are powerful. In fact, we simply cannot stand against them. But Jesus can – and with him, in his name, we *can* stand firm. So let’s not get obsessed with these defeated powers – but let’s not pretend they don’t exist either.

OK – so what about the bit where Jesus is a misogynistic bigot who uses a racial slur to be rude to a woman in great distress?

Let's look at that bit next. (Hint: he isn't.) Jesus told the woman:

'First let the children eat all they want, for it is not right to take the children's bread and toss it to the dogs.'

Mark 7.27 (NIV)

In Jesus' day it was common for the Jews to call Gentiles **dogs**, especially the people from Tyre. (Some say the word 'dog' means 'puppy' but I'm not sure that makes much difference!) In terms of rudeness, perhaps Jesus is sitting somewhere between calling the French 'frogs' and using the N-word to describe a black person: worse than 'frog' but nowhere near the other.

Why does Jesus speak this way?

First, we need to remember we only have the spoken word, and as anyone who has misunderstood an email will know, the way you say something in person makes a big difference.

Second is the context. Jesus has *specifically* gone to a Gentile region – of course he expects to meet Gentiles! In the coming verses he will heal and feed Gentile crowds as he has healed and fed Jewish crowds. His reply is discouraging, but not dismissive.²

Third is the word **first** (27). Whenever Mark uses this particular form of the word, it precedes something big.

In 3.27 *first* Satan is bound, *then* his house is plundered. In 9.11-12 *first* Elijah comes, *then* the Messiah. In 13.10 *first* the gospel must be proclaimed, *then* comes the end. Here Jesus is describing the actual order things happen in the New Testament: *first* there is a mission to Israel, *then* to the ends of the earth.

Fourth, the result of Jesus' challenge is a clear demonstration of the woman's wit and faith. She replies: **'Lord, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs'** (28). She owns the insult, but like the woman who just wanted to touch his robe she knows she doesn't need much – with Jesus, a **crumb** is enough.

She demonstrates *such* faith. Not in coming to Jesus in the first place – that was desperation. No, she demonstrates her faith when she *goes*. Think about it: her daughter is in serious trouble. She's tried everything. Her last hope is a man she's never met but everyone says is amazing. They have a brief conversation and he tells her, **'Go, the demon has left your daughter'** (29) – and she *does*. **That's what I call faith: not coming to Jesus in desperation or otherwise, but trusting and obeying what he says.**

What does your faith in Jesus look like? Coming to church? It might not feel like it when you want a lie-in on a Sunday, but coming to church is the *easy* part (at least it is in the UK).

Real faith involves trusting Jesus in the things that *actually matter*. With our relationships, do we stand out by not gossiping, by speaking truth and love, by living in holiness – or do we look like everyone else? With our time, do we give so we can't do other things – or do we fit serving God around other commitments? With our financial giving, do we give to the church so it hurts – or just enough so we don't really notice? With prayer, do we rattle off a list of names and the Lord's Prayer before rushing out of the door, or do we get up early so we have time to truly seek the Lord? The list could go on. The question is: what matters to *you*? Being liked? Time? Money? Getting stuff done? Something else? Do you – *could you* – trust and obey Jesus with what *actually matters*?

We don't know this woman's name but she showed more faith and understanding than his disciples who keep not getting it. And remember: she's a Gentile, a non-Jew, outside the covenant and God's promises. Or is she? Centuries earlier God promised Abraham: **'all peoples on earth will be blessed through you'** (Genesis 12.3) – now that promise is being fulfilled in Jesus. With this miracle Jesus kicked off a tour of a Gentile region, matching his actions in Israel. It took his followers a while to catch up, but in the end they realised: Jesus came for *everyone*.

Your God will come (31-37)

I wonder what is the most amazing thing you've ever seen? I've shared before my wonder at seeing the Milky Way, my love of mountain views. Maybe for some of you now holding your first grandchild is up there. Maybe it's the sight of the sun setting over the ocean. Maybe it's the embrace of a loved one after a long journey or time apart.

The next section ends with people wide-eyed and gobsmacked (that's the BBT: Ben's Bible Translation of verse 37). Mark uses a double superlative: something like 'utterly amazed beyond all measure'; personally I prefer 'wide-eyed and gobsmacked'.

But why? They didn't see what Jesus did – the whole thing took place in private (33). It *is* amazing to heal a deaf mute – but *this* amazing? People have been amazed at Jesus before in Mark – but that was when he raised someone from the dead. So why now?

Let's dig into it.

First, a bit more geography. At the start of verse 31 Jesus is in Tyre. Mark tells us **he went through Sidon, down to the Sea of Galilee and into the region of the Decapolis** (31). Sounds unremarkable, until you realise where Sidon is.

Here you go. As you can see, if you're in Tyre, Sidon is *not* in the direction of the Decapolis – and between the two is a huge desert. It makes no sense for Jesus to go from Tyre to the Decapolis via Sidon. Some say Mark didn't know his geography, but I think it's better to read the Bible with a bit more humility.

Here's a map of Southern Europe. On the left we have Chambéry, where Jess and I stayed overnight on our way to Italy. On the right we have Lake Como, surrounded by mountains, where Jess and I left Italy and crossed the border into Switzerland singing, 'The hills are alive...'

And this is a *very* rough approximation of our route. You might put it like Mark does in verse 31: 'Ben and Jess left the vicinity of Chambéry and went through Naples, up to Venice and into the region of the Alps.' Does that mean you don't know European geography? No! That's what happened.

Maybe this is simply the route Jesus took. Maybe he wanted to preach to the people in Sidon, or to travel through the desert? For that might help explain why these people were wide-eyed and gobsmacked, why they were quite so amazed at Jesus.

We'll come to that in a minute.

There's a huge contrast between this and the previous miracle. There Jesus cast out a demon remotely, without even a word of command. Here he is much more hands-on – literally:

[Jesus] took [the man] aside, away from the crowd. [He] put his fingers into [his] ears. Then he spat and touched the man's tongue. He looked up to heaven and with a deep sigh said to him '*Ephphatha!*' (which means 'Be opened!'). At this, the man's ears were opened, his tongue was loosed and he began to speak plainly.

Mark 7.33-34 (NIV)

Why so hands on? This is one of those times when the Bible is frustrating because it doesn't tell us *why!* But good readers of the Bible start from a position of *trust*: if it doesn't say, we don't need to know – we need to look elsewhere for the point God is making. Perhaps the reassurance of touch was what the man needed. To me the **look up to heaven** and **deep sigh** is what matters – it tells me of Jesus' compassion for the hurting, the effort of his battle with evil and brokenness, the strength he drew from the Father.

As we've seen, the people were wide-eyed and gobsmacked. They wouldn't shut up talking about Jesus. But, seriously, why? Was this really such an amazing miracle? What's going on?

The clue is in verse 32. Mark tells us the man **was deaf and could hardly talk**. The word he uses for the speech difficulty appears twice in the Greek Bible: here and in one other place. I think it is no coincidence that Mark uses it, because he wants to draw our attention to that other verse.

Do you want to hear it? Let me read it to you **¶**:

Then will the eyes of the blind be opened
and the ears of the deaf unstopped.
Then will the lame leap like a deer,
and the **mute tongue** shout for joy.

Isaiah 35.5-6a (NIV)

When does Isaiah say these things will happen? What event is it that brings such power and joy? **‘Be strong,’** he says in verse 4, **‘Do not fear,’** he says, **¶ ‘your God will come’** (Isaiah 35.4).

How might these Gentiles have known such a prophecy? Well unlike the people in Tyre they weren’t enemies of the Jews but lived side-by-side so shared news and stories. But also, in chapter 5 Mark tells us how Jesus cast a Legion of demons out of a man who then **began to tell how much Jesus had done for him** – where? – **¶ in the Decapolis** (5.20) the very region Jesus is in now.

Before, these people had only heard, but now they saw with their own eyes... **‘He has done everything well,’ they said. ‘He even makes the deaf hear and the mute speak’** (37).

In other words: *this* moment is *that* prophecy... in Jesus **God has come**. *That* is why they were *so* amazed, *that* is why they were wide-eyed and gobsmacked. For Isaiah’s prophecy continues...

6 **¶** Water will gush forth in the wilderness
and streams in the desert.
7 The burning sand will become a pool,
the thirsty ground bubbling springs...
8 And a highway will be there;
it will be called the Way of Holiness...
9 only the redeemed will walk there,
10 and those the Lord has rescued will return.
They will enter Zion with singing;
everlasting joy will crown their heads.
Gladness and joy will overtake them,
and sorrow and sighing will flee away.

Isaiah 35.6b-10 (NIV, abridged)

This was the start of *that*.

Trust

As Jesus walked the long desert road from Sidon to Galilee and the Decapolis, I wonder if he called this prophecy to mind, along with God's promise to Abraham in Genesis 12.3?

For in these few verses, these two miracles, Mark tells us so much about **J** who Jesus is and why he came. He makes sure we know beyond doubt that Jesus was in a Gentile region, among non-Jewish people, fulfilling the ancient promise to Abraham that **J** **'all nations will be blessed through you'** (Genesis 12.3). And, Mark points us to Isaiah's prophecy: **J** **'your God will come'** (Isaiah 35.4). In this man Jesus, Mark says, **God has come**.

These people were desperate, and found they could trust Jesus. **J** But what about you? Will you dare to trust him with the things that actually matter to you? Will you keep trusting him when you feel all you're getting is **crumbs**, when he takes longer than you'd like to bring **streams** to your **desert**? Will you trust him that **the Way of Holiness** is the best and only way for his children to live? Following Jesus isn't easy... but it's *better*. So will you trust him?

¹ Schnabel, *Mark (TNTC)*, 172.

² See English, *Mark (BST)*, 149.