

Year B Proper 23 Wouldn't You Like to Know Mark 7 verses 24 to 37

When we read Scripture, we meet an awful lot of people that we really don't get to know very well. After all, reading the Bible isn't like reading a best seller that gives you lots of detail...take the story of Mary and Joseph for instance. If it were a novel, part of it might read something like, "With a graceful movement, Mary tucked her long, dark hair behind her ear, away from her warm brown eyes as she bent to gaze in wonder at the baby cooing happily in his bed. She flashed a grateful smile at her husband, Joseph, as he handed her her favourite meal of roasted lamb and chickpeas" And on it would go. Sometimes we get enough detail to tweak our interest – like John the Baptist with his camel hair belt and diet of locusts. I'd love to see what he really looked like because I picture a bit of a wild man. And then we have Jesus. Considering that the New Testament is all about him, we really don't know much about him as a person...his favourite colour, his favourite meal, his type of humour...and, of course, we have no idea what he actually looked like.

I think, "Gee, I wish we knew more about him, more about his personal life and what he looks like" but then I think, "No, maybe it's better this way." What if Jesus likes pop music and you listen to nothing but country? What if he's a night owl and you're an early bird? No, it's better this way because not knowing all the details allows Jesus to be a companion for everyone, a teacher for everyone, the Saviour for everyone.

Mark does something very important in today's Gospel. As we rightfully acknowledge that Jesus is God – there are two healings in this story, one where he doesn't even need to see the person he heals – not only is he God, Mark brings it home to us that Jesus is also very human. Jesus is one of us. Being a follower of Jesus does not mean

worshipping a far off God that we will never see until we die or until the great resurrection when Jesus comes again. Being a Christian means being in relationship with Jesus, our risen Lord, now. Through Jesus, we know our God, we are close to our God.

In each of those healings we hear about, Mark hints at other things that draw us into exploring the human side of Jesus, that allow us to enter through the door of his public life into his private life just a little. Let's explore these hints and learn more about Jesus, more about the human side. Jesus is God but he was also the Jewish boy, raised in Nazareth by Mary and Joseph – a person who invites us into his circle of friends, a person who brings us home to eat dinner with his Father.

In the first story, we have a remarkable encounter between Jesus and a Gentile woman, specifically a Phoenician woman with ties to Syria. It provides us with a conversation between Jesus and a non-Jew – a conversation that maybe raises our eyebrows a little. The woman asks Jesus for his help for her daughter and Jesus answers that the children at the table (the Jews) should be fed first, not the dogs (her people). The woman replies that even the dogs get the scraps that fall on the floor.

This is an amazing story. It sounds like Jesus might be a little grouchy because he didn't get the alone time he needed. It sounds like Jesus is referring to the woman and the rest of her people as "dogs". Why on earth is a story that paints a negative picture of Jesus included in the Gospel? Because this story is not what a quick reading leads us to believe. Jesus knows the Scriptures inside out and backwards. He knows he is the light that lightens the Gentiles. He knows he is this woman's saviour just as much as he is the saviour for the Jewish people. You can just picture the twinkle in Jesus' eye as he participates in this conversation. Jesus isn't being grouchy...he's

being smart. He is in Gentile territory and he knows that Jews do refer to the Phoenicians as dogs. He's going to show his Jewish disciples they're wrong about the Phoenicians and so he playfully banter with this woman. With her quick wit, she catches on and she plays right back. Jesus allows this Gentile to demonstrate her enormous faith in front of his skeptical disciples and, of course, he then heals her daughter because of this faith.

Certainly, we see Jesus the God who is able to heal at a distance simply by *saying* the girl is healed but we also get to see Jesus as a person like you and me, a man with a sense of humour, a man with a common touch, whose engaging style of dealing with people is much more fascinating than a straight-up healing story would have been.

The second healing concerns a man who had a speech impediment probably because he was also deaf. People brought him to Jesus, also in non-Jewish territory, in the hopes of providing a healing for him. There are several things in this story that take us through the door into Jesus' private life, letting us know something about Jesus as he was.

First, there is an unusual occurrence in Mark's writing. Mark tells his Greek-speaking audience that the word Jesus used here is in his mother tongue, Aramaic. Mark tells us that Jesus said "Ephphatha," a word meaning "be opened". The down to earth simplicity of Jesus looking up to heaven and saying that one word caught the attention of the people who remembered it for us. There were actually many wandering miracle healers in Jesus' day. They were mostly phonies out to make money and so they put on a show with complicated incantations and spells which gave the impression that something really big was about to happen. Jesus was different because Jesus was authentic and didn't need to show off for an audience. In

fact, Mark tells us that Jesus tells the people to keep quiet about what he'd done. We all know, parents especially, that saying 'no' peaks curiosity. If I said to you, "Don't look behind you", you will very likely feel the urge to look behind you. Sure enough, the people there that day told everyone they met about Jesus healing the man.

Mark is the only Gospel in which Jesus uses something...like spit in this case...to assist him when he is performing a miracle. Why would he do that when we heard today that he doesn't need to? He simply spoke, didn't even see the girl or touch the girl – he just spoke and she was healed. So why does he stick his fingers in the deaf man's ears? Why does he spit on the mute man's tongue? Why does he look up to heaven and say, "Be opened"? Why? For us. Just like he engaged the Phoenician woman in order to prove to his disciples that Gentiles have faith too, here he uses visuals – sticking his fingers in the man's ears, spitting on his tongue, speaking to heaven – all for the benefit of those listening in. He is providing something they can grasp. They are seeing a human, just like them, work a miracle. Even more importantly, Jesus shows us that all things, everyday things like dirt, like bread and wine, are part of God's good creation, there to be used by everyday people like us to be closer to our God, to experience our God, to be in a loving, grateful relationship with our God.

All of this adds up to Mark doing something very important for us. His Gospel today allows us to see Jesus in his full humanity as a genuinely real and caring person, having a unique style of interaction. We see beyond the wonderworker and heroic leader image. We see Jesus, behind the door of his public life, as a person.

The people with Jesus in Mark's Gospel see a human and know that he is God. We know he is God and today we his human side. He is a man with a quick wit who heals the Phoenician girl. He is the compassionate, humble man who heals the deaf mute

Gentile. He is the companion, teacher, Saviour who knows our hurts, our guilt, our desires, and our needs. Whether we like country music, pop music, or classical music, we are able to be in relationship with God through Jesus, the boy from Nazareth.

Jesus shows us today that our individual likes and dislikes – such as the type of music we listen to – things that usually dictate who we consider our friends, are unimportant in God’s kingdom. God desires that all people and all of creation be in right relationship with each other and with God. Jesus demonstrates that today – he breaks down cultural barriers in healing an outsider. He breaks down societal barriers in healing an outcast. He brings them into relationship with him and sets the bar for us.

William Willimon wrote of this experience of relationship in his book, *Sunday Dinner*. He writes, “Private, personal meetings with God have their time and place. But church on Sunday is not the time or the place. Sunday is [God’s] family day. It is a joyous day to get together, to reform and re-form the body, to meet one another, and to meet God. We are called forth from our rugged individualism and yoked to the Body. Unlikely, separated individuals are converted into family. We come to the table as virtual strangers; we rise and go forth as kinfolk...In Communion, in partaking of the same cup and the same loaf, we act out what we would like to be as a church; we practice eating as the Body of Christ so that we might become the Body of Christ...From the earliest day, the Lord’s Supper was seen as a reconciliation meal. Just as state banquets ratify a treaty between two nations, so the Lord’s Supper ratifies and recognizes our reconciliation, our reunion with God. This is the meal of the new testament, the new covenant which Christ has sealed. This reconciliation between God and humanity provides the setting whereby humanity can be

reconciled to itself...[Sharing Holy Communion] is one more way in which we act out with our bodies in worship what we feel in our hearts” (105, 108).

Maybe it would be nice to know if Jesus prefers carrots to brussel sprouts but we don't need to know. Just as Jesus pushes aside the exterior details like ethnicity, gender, and abilities or non-abilities, so too do we so that we, like Jesus, are a companion for everyone, a teacher for everyone, Christ for everyone...in relationship, living life in God's kingdom.