

A mother's faith

I wonder if like me you find our passage from Mark's Gospel this morning embarrassing at best and downright offensive at worst. Maybe, like me, you just wish it wasn't here or that Jesus had acted differently.

. Jesus is in the foreign territory of Tyre. It's Gentile territory and therefore it's hostile territory, turf that is soaked in centuries of bad blood between Jews and Syro-Phoenicians. And Jesus is tired. He's exhausted. He's drained from ministering to countless needy people and carrying the burdens of the world upon his shoulders. He needs a break, some peace and solitude, and hence v.24: "He entered a house and did not want anyone to know he was there." Yet for Jesus there can be no escape, and in no time there is an intrusion. One more desperate person. One more aching heart, this time a woman with a daughter with an unclean spirit. She comes to Jesus because she has heard about him and he may be the last chance for her and her daughter. And the whole tragedy and pathos of her predicament are hinted at in her approach. We read that she bowed down to his feet. We read that she begged him – *begged* him – to cast out the demon from her daughter. And then comes this strange, apparently heartless reply from Jesus: "Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." In other words Jesus is insisting that his first priority is to the Jewish people. It is to them that he must minister first and he cannot be deflected and diverted by every broken heart in a broken world.

Perhaps, like me, you wish that Jesus had replied otherwise, that he'd cut out the insulting reference to dogs, and that he'd just agreed unhesitatingly and healed the girl. I don't like this reply as it appears, and all sorts of attempts have been made to soften it, to explain it, to put Jesus in a better light and some may be plausible. What we are left with, however, is an

extraordinary dialogue between Jesus and the woman in which Jesus appears to be rebuked and persuaded into healing the little girl. Not surprisingly perhaps some feminist commentators have made much of this incident. Some have suggested that that this represents a turning point for Jesus, a kind of conversion moment, that this encounter with this woman dramatically changed his outlook and strategy. From this moment on Jesus' horizons expanded and his ministry became more inclusive of the Gentiles and if this is true then this encounter had a profound effect upon Jesus.

The effect on the woman, however, of this encounter is also striking. Jesus' reluctance to heal her daughter seems to draw out from her all her parental instincts. Jesus' hesitation seems to arouse in her an indignation that is fuelled by her utter dedication to her daughter's wellbeing, and it provokes from the woman a feisty and defiant response: 'Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs.'

So much, however, for Jesus and for this Syro-Phoenician woman. This morning, especially in the context of this service, I find my attention drawn to the third party in the story, the person who we all too easily forget. I refer of course to the little daughter, this young girl with an unclean spirit. For though she is central to the story she hovers on its edge, right out of the field of view and she too easily gets marginalised as we watch Jesus and her mother's exchanges. She is not even there in the encounter and we are told nothing about her – not her name, or her age, just her tragic circumstances. Presumably she is at home, where her mother will find her on her return, lying on the bed, the demon gone. But in our passage she has no voice. She is spoken for by her mother. Representation is made on her behalf, discussion about her takes place over her head, decisions are made for her – even though she is the one who stands to win or lose by this encounter. She is passive, even though it is ultimately her future that is at stake, her life that hangs in the balance.

And of course at one level that is exactly as it should be. The daughter really should not be there and should not be involved, for after all this is the nature of childhood: that burdens of decision making and choice and responsibility are lifted from little shoulders and carried by others who love and care for them. Who would want it otherwise? Good parenting surely demands that children be given space – not least in their imaginations – to explore the world and themselves without having to take responsibility for big decisions. They need a safe place where they can be protected from the pressures to make adult choices until they can learn to do so. That is all part of that realm of childhood, where children are free to be children - but worryingly it is being encroached upon today. Think of the fashion industry where children, especially young girls, are prematurely stylised and sexualised into adulthood. Or think of the realm of faith where parent's choice to bring up their children in their faith is denounced by atheists like Richard Dawkins as tantamount to child abuse – we must not make that choice for them, they must be left to choose for themselves! And at an extreme we have now examples of parents insisting that children should have the right to choose their own gender, a mind-bogglingly foolish response to the very real struggles that some people have with their identity.

No. Childhood is precious and must be protected and there are choices that must be made for children. And so it is right that this little girl in our passage should be represented by her mother, and that her mother should approach Jesus and plead to Jesus on her behalf.

Her mother, however, has come because she has reached the limits of what a mother can do. She is powerless and only Jesus can help, because her child has an unclean spirit. And whatever we believe about evil spirits, this has contemporary resonances because it is a reminder of malign and destructive influences that work upon children, today as much as ever. To take one example, I am so grateful that my children grew up

before the real explosion in social media. Social media of course can be wonderful, not least for teenagers, but it can also be a cruel and malign power that plays upon children's self-esteem and image at a time when they are extremely vulnerable. And there are so many powers and pressures that play upon our children today, pressures to achieve, pressures sometimes to achieve what their parents want them to be. Indeed we must recognise – and this is very frightening - that among the malign and destructive influences that harm children are in fact their parents, and I'm not talking here about child-abusers. I'm talking about well-meaning parents who do our best, but inevitably our influence is not entirely benign, and sometimes we leave our children with scars - just as we ourselves have been scarred.

And so we bring this child in this story out of the shadows and place her centre-stage. Here is a little girl, vulnerable and at the mercy of that which harms her and deprives her of life as God intended it. And here is a parent who fiercely and boldly acts on her behalf, refusing to be deflected. And above all here is a parent who does the one thing necessary, makes the one crucial decision on her daughter's behalf, seeking out Jesus and his life-giving Lordship over evil.

And in a sense that is the story of what we do here this morning in baptising Claire. Here we gather round this little daughter, so vulnerable, so blessed with all the innocence of infancy. And here Ferry and Tiwi, like the mother in the story, affirm their parental responsibilities to her. But this morning we recognise too the malign forces that will influence and shape Claire's life. The world is not a wholly benign place. Still blessed with so much goodness and beauty and love, there is nevertheless evil at work, an evil spirit that manifests itself in a thousand powers that direct human life – infecting it, sabotaging it, diminishing it. And all of us here recognise that we are part of that dark side of the world: we contribute to it, and we collude with it. And so Ferry and Tiwi do the one thing necessary. They make the

one choice that Claire cannot yet make and which needs above all to be made for her. They bring her to Jesus, the Lord of Life, the one with the power over the darkness.

And bringing Claire to Jesus involves two things. At one level, what is happening here in baptism is that Claire is being incorporated into a community where there is a different Spirit at work: not the spirit of the world but the Spirit of Christ, the Holy Spirit. That means that she is incorporated into a community of resistance, a community of defiance that rejects every other spirit and lord – in other words the Church, and its outpost here at the English Reformed Church in Amsterdam. And it's so appropriate that this baptism has taken place in a service where we have celebrated our children and our Sunday School and Junior Church. For it is in worshipping together and in learning together that children are ingrafted into that community and they are shaped and formed by the Spirit of the living God and they learn to renounce the false spirit of the age.

At another level, however, as well as being incorporated into this community, Claire is also receiving that Spirit of Christ into the very centre of her life and her personality and her identity. Unlike the child in the story, little Claire of course is not possessed with an evil spirit, thank God. Yet it is interesting that from the early centuries the rite of baptism often included what was called 'exorcism'. This was a renunciation of Satan. And it was a recognition that enthroning Christ in a person's life displaced and banished every other lord. Here in Claire's baptism it is not an evil spirit that is literally being cast out, but it is a case of a different spirit being welcomed in. That is the Holy Spirit that seals Christ's Lordship over her life and that is at work in her from these earliest days, nurturing and shaping her and resisting every other spirit.

So thank God for this mother, this brave, determined mother who would not take 'no' for an answer. And thank God for Jesus who had the grace and humility to be challenged and

changed by a woman. And thank God for this young girl in whom we see all our children, and who reveals to us something of what it means to be the church.

Holy and gracious God,
Maker of all things,
all that comes to be comes from you,
you hold all the world in your embrace,
and we worship and praise you.
You have created all things in their great diversity,
people of every nation, tribe and tongue,
all the variety and difference bearing witness
to the fullness and richness of who you are.
And you invite us to feast on your love, your grace,
And to find our unity in the great circle of your love.
Gracious God, we know that we are not worthy to come.
We would hesitate even to pick up the crumbs from under your
table,
aware of everything in our lives which we wish were different,
conscious of all the ways we would long to be better people.
And so as we draw near to you here
we acknowledge our sins and our failures

But we do so knowing that your love is stronger than
everything that would pull us away from you;
your grace is more resilient than our fickle ways.
Reassure here that we are forgiven
and give us grace to change
that we may be worthy of our calling as your people.
For we pray in Jesus' name and in his words
We pray together saying...