

The Gospel reading that I've just read from the Gospel of Mark is challenging. It's challenging for a number of reasons. Perhaps the most obvious is that Jesus appears to be quite rude to this Syrophenician woman who comes to see him. And it's also difficult because it appears at first sight to be at odds with the other readings that we heard today from Scripture. That reading, for instance, the epistle that we heard from James, is very clear and direct. It's all about treating all of God's people equally and fairly. James uses three phrases to make his point, all of which describe practices in the church he saw, which he didn't like. He complains that people in the church were showing acts of favoritism. They were making distinctions between people and showing partiality to the rich whilst ignoring the poor.

It's a theme reinforced by the psalm that we heard. "The Lord," it says, "lifts up those who are bowed down, and the Lord cares for the stranger. He sustains the orphan and the widow." We are not to show favoritism, to draw distinctions, to display partiality, because God doesn't. And yet it's so easy for all of us to make judgments about people. There's that famous story about the judge who addressed someone on the jury who said he couldn't possibly be on the jury. And the judge said, "Why?" He said, "Well, just look at that man. He's quite clearly guilty. I can't possibly be impartial." And the judge said, "That's the lawyer you're pointing at. His defendant's on the right."

We're all so quick to make judgments, to put people into categories. I heard a story once of a church, possibly a bit like St. James, in an affluent area, and halfway through the Sunday morning service, a sort of rough-looking gentleman walked into the church, and there was a bit of a kerfuffle, and everybody looked around to see what would happen, and the sort of patriarch of the church, someone who'd been a warden for many years, got up, and the rough-looking man, this being an Episcopal church, had to walk to the front of the church to find a seat. And he got there. And this patriarchal warden, everyone thought, "Well, what's he going to do? What's he going to say?" And he simply walked to the front of the church

and sat next to the man who didn't look as he fit in, because he saw him as God sees him and draws no distinctions and made no judgments. In God's kingdom, all are welcome, all are included, and everyone is equal.

So, what do we make of this Gospel reading about the Gentile woman who comes to Jesus and asks him to cast a demon out of her daughter? And Jesus replies, "Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." At first sight, this appears to not only be drawing a sharp distinction between the Jews and the Gentiles, but also using offensive language to draw the line between them. How does that fit with the other readings that we've heard?

We might be able to begin to answer that question by putting this Gospel reading in its context, because that, as so often the case, is very important in understanding a passage which at first looks challenging. It comes between two stories about bread. We could say that this passage is sandwiched between those stories, but that would be corny. So let that one ride.

On either side of the two stories in this passage, there are stories of Jesus miraculously multiplying a small number of loaves and feeding thousands of people. In the first one, which happens in a Jewish area, there are 12 baskets of bread left over. In the second story, that comes after the Gospel we've just heard, it's in a Gentile area, and there are seven baskets of food, of bread left over.

And just before this reading, Jesus has a big bust-up with the Jewish religious leaders, which had started with the Jewish leaders complaining that Jesus's disciples weren't eating the bread with what they called clean or undefiled hands, by which they meant that Jesus and his disciples hadn't gone through the elaborate washing rituals that distinguished the clean from the unclean, which was a big part of drawing the distinction between the us and them. And that argument ends with Jesus declaring nothing external unclean. And in this way, he's beginning to dismantle that whole ceremonial system by which the Jewish people at the time kept themselves distinct and marked

themselves as separate from the Gentiles who they regarded as unclean.

And straight after this rather heated debate that Jesus gets into, he heads off to the region of Tyre, where our Gospel reading begins. And Tyre is a Gentile country, and the woman who comes to him is first identified as a Gentile. So, clearly, that's important in the story. And I think what we see when we see the context of the exchange that Jesus has with this woman, we can see how it fits with the theme that Mark's developing in his Gospel. After Jesus, in his discussion with the Jewish religious leaders, opens up the possibility of the Gentiles being included in God's kingdom, we see here the power of that kingdom operating in Gentile territory.

The good news of the kingdom can't be bottled up just with the people of Israel. The Jewish people might have heard the news of the kingdom first, but Jesus is quite clear, it's not exclusively for them. The woman uses Jesus's language to point out that there is more than enough bread to go around. There are crumbs. There are leftovers. And I think what we can see in this story and in the surrounding chapters are the barriers between people starting to come down. The separation between peoples, especially the separation between the Jews and the Gentiles, is being challenged. And that message is reinforced as Jesus heads off to another Gentile region to heal the deaf man, another Gentile. God's kingdom, we see in Mark's Gospel, is being opened to all. The barriers, the distinctions are coming down.

And this revolutionary message is amplified by the writers of the New Testament. Saint Paul grasped this message. He wrote this, "In Christ, there is no Jew nor Gentile, slave nor free, nor is there male or female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus." Saint Paul recognized how radical Jesus's life and his message had been. He broke down the barriers that exist between people, the barriers that we put up. Jesus ate with all sorts of people. He mixed with people who don't normally mix. Yes, Jesus was a Jew. Yes, the message he had was first given to the people of Israel, but the kingdom he

inaugurated, of which he spoke, was for all people. The banquet that he anticipated was open to everyone. All God's people are invited to share in his heavenly bread.

So, if we see all these readings together, what are they saying to us? Well, I certainly think that they can lead us in the direction of seeking to break down barriers. We all have favorites. We all make judgments. We all define ourselves by what we are not. And we all attach labels to those to whom we don't think we have much in common.

If you were here last week, you'll have heard Martha Ehringer talking about Episcopal Community Services, who've been doing a great work in San Diego for over a hundred years. And there's a picture in the brochure that she showed of Paula McColl, one of our members who goes regularly to one of the houses for unhoused people that ECS runs, and with Gerri Smith, she runs an art class, and you might remember that every now and again, the work from that class gets displayed in our gallery, which are always terrific evenings. What I like about those evenings is that the guests we invite to display their work we call "the artists". We welcome the artists. And for one night, if only one night, the distinction between the housed and the unhoused has gone. We enjoy the work of the artists.

At Rally Sunday next week, our Outreach Committee will have a stall, and they'll be delighted to tell you more about ECS and the other organizations with which we work, which allow us to come alongside people who are very different to us and thereby discover our common humanity.

In Christ, there is no Jew or Gentile, slave or free, liberal or conservative, nor is there male or female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. Let's seek to live out that high calling and see people as God sees them and treat people as Jesus treated people he met. Amen.