

Sermon preached at Gisborne, 5 September 2021

O God, our guide, set your path clearly before us and lead us to follow you willingly for the sake of Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

Mark 7:24-37

When the need arises

When Mark wrote this Gospel,¹ the church included many Gentiles. By Mark's time, the church has gone through considerable struggles to determine its right relationship to Gentiles. Therefore, we see that the story of Jesus and the Syrophenician woman reflects that struggle in its earliest moments. We also see that needs arise in people's lives regardless of ethnicities, gender, politics or social status. Jesus healed people, Jews and Gentiles alike. But filling people's endless needs was not the only purpose of his ministry. The greater purpose was to open their spiritual eyes and ears and restore their faith in God. In doing so, their sufferings may be seen from new perspectives of God. In this vein, we'll explore the needs that we have through these points: needs and faith, and faith fulfils needs.

Needs and faith

Need has two sides – a physical side and a spiritual side. When we are hungry, we need food. When thirsty, water is what we need. In this case, we know what may ease our suffering. As soon as we eat food and drink water, our needs are met, and we may not think about water and food any longer. But if we experience scarcity of food and water, we may try hard to secure them. But in life, nothing can be under our complete control, that's why we are in need all the time. Jesus' ministry shows how he fulfils our ongoing needs in the life of God's kingdom.

From the beginning of his ministry, Jesus had worked to tend to people's endless needs. It includes the feeding of the five thousand² to a series of miracles, including the restoration of the deaf man's hearing and speech.³ In many cases, people could only identify their physical needs and wished Jesus to make them whole. But they didn't see that they were in need of God's grace. Today's reading is in the following of the previous passage in that Pharisees and scribes questioned Jesus about the purity laws. They saw his disciples eating food without washing hands. Jesus replied that it was what came out of a person that defiled, not what went

¹ 65-70 AD

² Mark 6:30-44

³ Mark 7:31-37

into a person from outside.⁴ Now, as if to prove his point, Jesus heads off into ‘impure’ territory, the gentile region of Tyre. Jesus seems exhausted and seeks some rest, but he can’t escape notice.

The woman who approaches Jesus breaks through every traditional barrier that should prevent her from doing so. She is a Gentile of Syrophenician origin. She lives outside of the land of Israel, outside of the law of Moses, a descendant of the ancient enemies of Israel. She is also a woman unaccompanied by a husband or male relative. On top of these, she initiates the conversation with a strange man. Worse still, her daughter is possessed by a demon. We presume that the woman and her daughter may be ostracised in the community. When she appeals to Jesus for healing her daughter, his words are not kind - “Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.”⁵ The “children” in this statement are the children of Israel; the “little dogs” (*kunaria*) are understood to be all other peoples. Despite Jesus’ cold and harsh words, she will not give it up. Her desperate need let her overcome any boundaries and obstacles. Her clever words - “Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs” moved Jesus. Jesus grants her the healing of her daughter.

In a gentile region, to a gentile woman and her demon-possessed daughter, God granted her healing through Jesus. Her needs are met through Jesus’ words - “For saying that, you may go—the demon has left your daughter.”⁶ She believes in him and leaves home.

In the case of a deaf man, his friends together with him are in the scene. The region of the Decapolis is also gentile territory. Like the Syrophenician woman, this man, too, is an outsider. His inability to hear and communicate with others make him cut off from the world. In this case, it is his friends who begged (*parakaleo*) him to lay hand on their friend.⁷ This time, Jesus doesn’t hesitate to respond to a desperate request. He heals the man and says, “Ephphatha! – be opened.” The man is not only physically healed. He is also restored to his community. By this time, we may wonder – are their needs faith at all? The short answer is yes.

In Mark, “faith” is hardly about getting Jesus’ name or titles right, nailing the right confession, or articulating proper doctrine. It’s about clinging to Jesus and expecting him to heal, restore, to save. It’s about demanding that he do what he says he came to do. For instance, this persistent

⁴ Mark 7:18-20

⁵ Mark 7:27

⁶ Mark 7:29

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Syrophoenician was not a theologian. But she didn't lose her purpose. Her theology didn't originate in books and study; it's an expression of painfully experienced need and fierce motherly love. Her persistence was rewarded by her faith in God, who is always working for life.

Faith fulfils needs

At first, the story of the Syrophoenician woman and the deaf man seems to suggest that the relationship with the pagans, who are considered unclean, is to be avoided at all costs. Therefore, the resolution of problems ought to follow a privileged chronological order: the sons of Abraham first⁸. The *Syrophoenician* woman reversed this logic by her response to Jesus' statement. She changed the perspective by talking about "*paidia*" ('little children' in Greek), a word that focuses more on the size or age of the little ones. By faith, she saw herself as a Gentile who would benefit from the blessings of the children of Abraham.⁹ Her argument was based on the image used by Jesus (the children's bread), and then, she alters the point of view. Her perspective expresses the idea that no matter what your ethnic or religious origin is, once you have any problem, it needs to be sorted out. The chronological priority of the children of Abraham is thereby abolished. This woman's faith recognised that the Lord's purifying power could cross boundaries to benefit the pagans. Therefore, the space where the Spirit of God works is enlarged by pushing away the unclean spirit from her daughter. The healing of the deaf man also proves that his needs are met where the Spirit of the Lord operates. Faith breaks barriers and establishes a healthy relationship with God regardless of the believers' origin. Faith overcomes ethnic and religious differences. Faith fulfils needs.

We can see the theme 'faith fulfils needs' in the story 'The boy who finally listened,' the question was that what his needs were before and after he met the storyteller. Since he stopped listening, he couldn't find a home for imagination. He couldn't reach the box of wonder in his mind. He needed to find a way to resolve it. That was his need before he met the storyteller. His need afterwards was that he needed to listen to beautiful stories despite of the absence of the storyteller. Miraculously, his need was met when the box of wonder in his mind opened by itself. He had all the stories that he heard from the storyteller. He was the storyteller.

⁸ Mark 7:27

⁹ Mark 7:28

This story together with Jesus' healing ministry make us think about our needs and faith in God. How are we working to open people's eyes and ears so that they can see and hear the wonder of God? How can we fulfil people's ongoing needs in what way? Now it's the time to think about it that will be part three of this sermon. May God help us identify our needs as the church and find answers in us whose head is Jesus Christ. Amen.