

Prayer

Jesus Christ; You are our constant companion in life,
our guide throughout the roughest storms,
our companion who shares our deepest thoughts,
our support when unexpected trouble comes;
our tutor in the midst of all our learning;
touch our hearts afresh today and grant us peace. AMEN

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly Theme: Nuclear power

Pray today for the people who work in places of great danger or potential danger. Pray that people will understand the full risks of the technology used and maintain safety.

On-going prayers

- Give thanks for the joy of worship and the love of God
- Pray for Australia and the terrible loss of life there in fires
- Pray for Madagascar, and the political unrest there

Meditation

Where do you find peace?

In a quiet moment sitting down with something to read?
Wandering about in a garden, with its sights and smells?
Thinking to yourself whilst alone for a few moments?
Walking briskly through the hills on a weekend break?
Putting your head back for an afternoon snooze?
Talking to the one you love on a lazy Saturday morning?
Doing what you know you can do well, and enjoying it?

Where do you find peace?

Perhaps the truest peace comes unexpectedly,
When, in moments never guessed or pre-determined
Something of God's love has opened like a flower:
We stop, we look, and as we take the offered gift,
We find that everything seems different;
And it is ...

Bible Study - Mark 7:24-37

²⁴ Jesus left from there and set out for the region of Tyre. He went into a house and did not want anyone to know He was there, but He could not escape notice.

²⁵ However, straight away, a woman heard about Him whose young daughter had an unclean spirit, and she came and fell down at His feet. ²⁶ Now the woman was a Greek, of Syrophenicia origin. She begged Him to cast the demon out of her daughter. ²⁷ He said to her, 'Let the children be fed first, for it is not right to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs.' ²⁸ But she replied and said to Him, 'Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs.' ²⁹ Then He said to her, 'Because you said this, you may go;

for the demon has left your daughter.’³⁰ So she went home and found the child lying in bed, and with the demon gone.

³¹ Then He returned from the region of Tyre, and went through Sidon to the Sea of Galilee, into the region of the Decapolis. ³² They brought to Him a deaf man who had a speech impediment; and they begged Him to lay His hands on him.

³³ He took him aside in private, away from the crowd, and put His fingers into the man’s ears, then he spat and touched the man’s tongue. ³⁴ He looked up to heaven, sighed and said to him, ‘Ephphatha,’ (which means, ‘Be opened.’) ³⁵ And his ears were opened straight away, his tongue was released, and he spoke without difficulty. ³⁶ Jesus ordered them not to tell anyone; but the more He did so, the more enthusiastically they proclaimed it. ³⁷ They were utterly astounded, saying, ‘He has done everything well; He even makes the deaf hear and the dumb speak.’

Review

These two remarkable stories of healing mark the beginning of a new phase of Jesus’ ministry. Our reading describes Jesus moving North West towards the general region of Tyre and Sidon (7:24,26,31) which was inhabited by a mixture of Gentile people of Greek origin and some people of Jewish extraction. If you glance through the next few chapters of Mark, you will find that Jesus only returns to the traditional Jewish territory of Capernaum later on (see 9:33). Although Jesus was never far away from exclusively Jewish territory, these two stories of Jesus begin a distinct new phase of ministry amongst the Gentiles, and everything that happens next must be interpreted with this in mind.

The first healing story is remarkable (7:24-30). Jesus cast out an ‘unclean spirit’ from a child even though the child was not with Him when He spoke the words of healing (7:25); He healed the girl because of the faith of her Gentile mother. Such an incident is incredible enough, but this rather unusual feature of the healing is rarely discussed because of the even more extraordinary nature of the encounter between Jesus and the mother (7:26-29).

The dialogue between the Gentile woman and Jesus is hard for us to understand, because it appears to show Jesus as hard in manner, initially refusing to help the woman because she was not a Jew (7:27). However, it was quite usual for Jesus to say something unexpected or apparently strange to someone who asked for healing (see Jesus’ words to the paralytic – 2:5, or the Gerasene demoniac -5:8,9f.). What Jesus said to people invariably drew faith out of them, or obtained some other significant response. In this way, Jesus sought to help all who came to Him. His ministry was to help them come before God the Father so that they could benefit from the healing or deliverance they sought. In this case, although Jesus’ words sound harsh, the response of the Gentile woman was incredibly astute and lowly (7:28), and it quickly drew a positive response from Jesus both to her and to her daughter, the girl was immediately delivered of her demon (7:29). The words spoken by the woman have become proverbial within the church, describing humble acceptance of the grace of God; ‘even the dogs under the table eat the ... crumbs’.

The second healing took place outside Jewish territory again as Jesus returned towards the Sea of Galilee from Tyre, heading south east towards the Decapolis (7:31). A man was brought to Jesus who was deaf and had a ‘speech impediment’. We do not know anything more about the man, except that he had companions with faith in Jesus to ask for Him to heal their friend (7:32). This miraculous healing has two interesting features. Firstly, the unusual methods Jesus used to heal the man, spitting and placing His fingers in the man’s ears (7:33,34), and secondly, the enthusiastic response of the people present. Jesus’ actions (7:34) seem to have been designed specifically for the man, and although we do

3. Discuss how it might be possible to get more people to read and know Scriptures.

Discipleship

Personal comment:

Some people in the church find it profoundly difficult to accept Jesus' ministry of healing and casting out of demons. Yet it is essential to what He did, and we cannot avoid the call to be involved with what Jesus did in a way that meets the needs of people today. It is my personal experience that trusting God for healing begins with trusting God for personal matters on a regular basis, including health. In addition, although I cannot say that I go around conscious of the work of the enemy or demonic activity, I have been led to a place where my mind is not closed to this understanding of the nature of evil, and I am now ready for all Satan might throw at me. It is an important path to walk.

Ideas for discipleship programme

- *Take time to reflect on whether you are trusting God during your everyday life, or assuming that He cares for you and doing what you judge best? If possible try to discuss this issue with a friend.*
- *Pray for all those who find it hard to accept the healing and deliverance ministry of Jesus, and instead of accepting it as part of Jesus' work, they reject both the ministry and those who practice it today. Pray about this with sensitivity.*

Final Prayer

Lord God, Creator of the World and Saviour of all, show Your majesty and might through the things You do all around us; through signs and wonders, through works of love and peace, and through the sustenance and guidance of the poor in heart. Bless this world You have made we pray. AMEN

not know why Jesus did this, what He did was certainly effective! The people commented 'He has done everything well' (7:37), but this was no ordinary compliment. The crowds were beginning to connect what they saw and heard of Jesus with what they expected of their long expected Messiah. The Messiah had been expected to 'make the deaf hear and the dumb speak' (ref. Isaiah 35:5, 43:8).

This raises an interesting point; who were the people who followed Jesus around? Were they people who congregated from local villages? Were some of them people who simply to see what Jesus would do next? Did news go ahead of Him, so that people turned up from local villages having heard about Him? We cannot know the precise answer, but whether Jesus was in Jewish or Gentile territory, the crowds kept following Him. Jesus had great difficulty in getting away from them, even when He needed to be private (7:33). It is remarkable that crowds continued to follow Jesus even though He was ministering in Gentile territory, and even more remarkable if the crowds contained both those historic enemies, Jew and Gentile.

Going Deeper

We will now study each of these stories in turn and see how they illuminate our understanding of what Jesus was doing during His ministry on earth. Jesus came 'to the Jew first and also to the Greek' (Romans 1:16), but it is how this works out as a realistic plan within the ministry of Jesus and His disciples which is of interest to us. Especially at times like today when there is little understanding of Jews by Gentile Christians, and of Christian Jews by Christians.

The Syrophenician woman's daughter

After the dispute with the Pharisees and scribes from Jerusalem, Jesus headed North. The effect of Jesus' movements as described by Mark is to help us understand that there was a 'Gentile' side of Jesus' ministry. In each of the Gospels Jesus is depicted as spending some time in Gentile territory interacting with a variety of Gentile people in often highly significant ways. Matthew also records this story (Matt 15:21-28) as part of his description of Jesus' Gentile ministry, and Luke record's Jesus' famous description of a journey into Gentile territory in the story of the 'Good Samaritan' (see Luke 10:30-37). In John's Gospel, Jesus famously met a Samaritan woman by a well and had a profoundly important spiritual conversation with her about worship (John 4:7-30). We must conclude that Jesus not only undertook ministry in Gentile territory, but that it was almost always of particular importance, and deserves our attention.

Before we look at the famous dialogue between Jesus and the woman which resulted in the consequent deliverance of her daughter, it is worth noting that the famous prophet Elijah had travelled into the same region, eight hundred years previously (1 Kings 17:8f.) helping a widow from Zarephath at a time of drought. Then, after performing a miracle to provide for her during desperate times, he healed her son (1 Kings 17:17-24). The question is this, although we know that Zarephath was in the same region in which Jesus was travelling, do we have any reason to think that Jesus had this connection with Elijah in mind? In Luke 4, after Jesus had stirred up trouble by preaching in the Capernaum synagogue, he said; 'there were many widows in Israel in the time of Elijah, when the heaven was shut up three years and six months, and there was a severe famine over all the land; yet Elijah was sent to none of them except to a widow at Zarephath in Sidon.' (Luke 4:25,26). By quoting this Old Testament story, Luke tells us that Jesus justified ministry to the Gentiles after He was rejected by His own people. Although Jesus always maintained that His call was firstly to His own people the Jews, and to be their Messiah, he knew full well that the reason for this call was that God's plan was for grace to be made available ultimately to all people.

For this reason, it is entirely right for us to be careful not to jump to the wrong conclusion as we read what Jesus said to the woman. It sounds dismissive for Him to say, 'Let the children be fed first, for it is not right to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs'. Now, although calling someone a 'dog' was a term of abuse, the word Jesus actually used was a diminutive term for a dog, perhaps even 'puppy'; and this means that we must consider the possibility that Jesus' words were not at all as sharp as they may seem. The response from the woman was certainly not sharp; 'Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs'. Now, once we have stripped away the veneer of insult which initially appeared to be present in the conversation, we can more easily see that the woman's reply was one of considerable spiritual insight. She accepted her place before Jesus as a Gentile woman, and yet persisted in good faith to ask for His help, showing an insightful belief that the good things of God can never be limited. The woman certainly knew what she was saying; she was determined to get help for her daughter.

The result of this exchange was extraordinary. Mark does not tell us that Jesus commended the woman's faith (whereas Matthew does – see Matt 15:28), but he says that Jesus delivered the woman's daughter from her unclean spirit as a direct result of her humility and insight. Mark did not mention 'faith' because He was looking for these precise qualities in her reply. The woman undoubtedly did show faith, but Mark was right to allow his story to speak for itself. After she had spoken, Jesus then delivered her child of an unclean spirit (7:29) when the child concerned was nowhere near Him! This was an amazing new feature of Jesus' power and authority, but for Jesus, distance was no object to His power, and His ability to do this in Gentile territory was highly symbolic. Jesus had the power to command the unclean spirits wherever they were, in Jewish territory or Gentile.

In this way Jesus showed His complete and ultimate authority over all things. He showed Himself to be the Messiah of the Jewish people, but was also beginning to demonstrate, before His death and resurrection, something of His Pentecostal power and authority as the Saviour of all people. When all Israel had abandoned Almighty God in the days of Elijah, God's mercies poured out over the boundaries of Israel and came in grace to ordinary people who lay beyond the confines of God's chosen (Elijah and the widow of Zarephath in 1 Kings 17). This ancient story was a prophecy of what would happen when the Messiah came, as our story shows.

The healing of a deaf and dumb man

Jesus appears to have been constantly on the move at this time. Mark tells us that after this incident, Jesus moved back towards Galilee, but keeping in Gentile territory rather than Jewish. We know nothing about the man who was brought to Jesus, and it is futile for us to wonder whether he was Jewish or Gentile. Perhaps, after the previous incident, Mark intends us to feel that this is irrelevant! Certainly, the early church and its leaders felt able to declare that 'in Christ, there is neither Jew nor Greek ...' (Gal 3:28, Col 3:11).

We are told that the man brought to Jesus was deaf and that he had a speech impediment. There are many words in Greek for different types of speech difficulty, but it is unclear to us what they mean, largely because we categorise these things quite differently today. You may find that some Bibles talk of this man as 'deaf and dumb'. Whatever the difficulty in speech the man had, it is not hard for us to imagine how difficult life must have been for him. It is hard to imagine that he could function without the care and support of friends and family, whether Jew or Gentile. Jesus, however, cut straight through any peripheral issues and dealt immediately with the man's problems.

Some have attempted to try and find some reasoning to the rather extraordinary methods used by Jesus in this healing. Clearly touch was important, but this was more than mere

touch; Mark tells us that Jesus 'put His fingers into the man's ears.' (7:33) It is easy to wonder, is this what we should do when offering healing ministry to those who are deaf? Then Jesus 'spat' (7:33) and then touched the man's tongue. It is not really possible to work out exactly what Jesus was doing here apart from saying that spittle was used along with touch. The rest is up to our imaginations! The important thing we can learn from all this may well be that from the perspective of a man who was deaf and had difficulty speaking, Jesus' actions went powerfully to the source of the problem, summed up by Jesus' shout, 'Ephphatha' (7:34). This was no 'magic' word, and Jesus' actions no ritual. A quick glance at what Jesus did when healing other people who were either deaf or dumb (e.g. 9:25) shows us that Jesus did what was necessary for the individual, He did not use formulas; and He was totally effective in His healing ministry.

After this remarkable healing, Jesus yet again asked for privacy (7:36), perhaps even secrecy. He continued to be cautious about people's ability to follow Him for the wrong reasons. Miracles were a demonstration of God's power, and healings were given for a reason, to show the Messiah for who He was, and this is what the people recognised at the end of the passage. When they said, 'He does everything well', it was an echo of the famous line in Genesis 1, in which Scripture records the words 'God saw that it was good' after each of the days of creation (roughly). The connection is not easy for us to see in English, but it is traceable from the Greek through the Septuagint version of the Old Testament back to the Hebrew of Genesis. So those who knew their Scriptures declared about Jesus that He was doing the work of God. This is further amplified by what the people said; 'He even makes the deaf hear and the dumb speak', which is a quote from Isaiah 35:5,6 and is a prophecy of God's powerful work of redemption.

Application

The reason why I make these points at the end of the study is because we need to be able to recognise Jesus in the same way. It is reasonable to expect that people of ancient times would have known these texts; both Jews and also others who lived in that region (whose ancestry went back to the old Kingdom of Israel that had existed there, centuries before). They were able to make deductions about who Jesus was because they knew Scriptures. Too often, people today are not able to 'make connections' and conclude important things about Jesus because they do not know the Scriptures, in particular the Old Testament. Christians can help society and lay the foundations for fruitful evangelism by doing their best to ensure that the Scriptures remain a part of their own culture and education, nationally. In too many places, the Bible is ignored or thrown away, and we do so at our peril.

The extraordinary nature of these healing miracles is also something which deserves comment. These should encourage us to have faith that God will do great things in our midst if we take heart and trust Him for such ministry. We do not have to parade great feats of healing, for people should be free to tell their own testimonies; but we should be prepared to pray directly for the healing and help that people ask for. It is the golden rule of ministry; if people ask you to pray for something then pray for it, straight away and in Jesus' name. Then follow the leading of the Spirit and everything the Lord has taught you about good counsel!

Questions *(for use in groups)*

1. In your group, discuss the significance of Jesus' casting out an unclean spirit 'from a distance'. Have you ever come across anything like this?
2. To what extent does it matter whether we use 'techniques' in the healing ministry? What techniques are helpful to people today?