

Monday Evening Bible Reading Group: December 9th: Mark 7: 24-37: Some Notes

It could well be that these two stories of Gentile healings are very deliberately placed after the account of Jesus telling his Jewish listeners that the old clean/unclean distinction is no longer valid. If we take the geography of the healing stories seriously, it seems that Jesus may have spent weeks or indeed months in gentile territory teaching his disciples in what were meant to be the less pressured surroundings of gentile territory – away from his Jewish critics and away from the Jewish nationalists who wanted to crown him as Jewish King against the Romans (and against the Jewish and semi-Jewish collaborators. Tyre and Sidon were Phoenician cities – territory allocated to a Jewish tribe but never actually conquered by the Jews. The Decapolis (Ten Towns) were Greek territory. Those who knew their Old Testaments would have recalled both that Elijah had done marvels outside Jewish territory; and that Isaiah 35 1-6, about the deaf hearing and the dumb speaking was now clearly seen to be speaking about a universal Messiah, not just a Jewish Messiah.

The healing of the possessed daughter has always fascinated hearers and readers. Clearly devils operate across racial boundaries, so why should God be more limited in his actions? Read the story very carefully. 1) Jesus came to get across to people God's saving purpose – if the healing aspect of his ministry loomed too large, the totality of his message could be put at risk. 2) Jesus wasn't saying that he had no universal role, but he was emphasising in his three year public ministry his starting point among the people among whom he had lived as "one of them" for the previous thirty years. 3) The "foreign" woman and Jesus both knew the conventions of Jew/Gentile relations, including the "dog" language. The cold words are shocking. It is quite possible that the tone of the conversation was warm rather than cold: Jesus uses puppy dog rather than cur dog terminology, and the woman seems seem to have (very effectively) picked up both this and the Jews first (not Jews exclusively) statement. Having said all that, It isn't heretical to think that just maybe the woman influenced Jesus' thinking. As with the centurion who invited Jesus to heal from a distance, Jesus is impressed – and says so. This is some woman, and some mother!

The healing of the deaf/dumb man is also interesting. Jesus uses a non-verbal approach with a non-verbal man, sensitive to his needs. There is also, of course, a symbolic aspect to this story: we do our hearing bit, then our speaking bit. A gentile spreads the Gospel. Jesus had already had cause to comment on the "deliberately deaf"!