

“Arguing With Jesus” – Mk 7:24-37 – Sep 10/06

Well, we had a very successful Davie Days yesterday, even with a bit of rain. This is the third year for the neighbourhood celebration, and it has grown considerably since the first time in Nelson Park when my truck was sufficient to carry all the tables that were used. This year Davie street was closed from Burrard to Broughton, with quite a few of the local businesses, agencies and groups putting on displays and providing information. We had a double table, and the Pride Society loaned us a tent, and volunteers showed up to help hand out fridge magnets and brochures – thanks to all of you who helped. Central was scheduled to receive the first Associate Membership in the Davie Village Business Improvement Association as an acknowledgement of our participation in the community, but the stage schedule went awry, so we will officially receive that accolade sometime in the near future, probably at the Association’s Annual Meeting.

I had a chance to touch base with a lot of the people we know in the neighbourhood and who know us, and also to meet a lot of new people as well. Most were friendly and congenial, but of course there was that one individual who just had to prove, to himself only as it turned out, that he was more clever than all the world religions put together, and was just itching to argue with me. We spent quite a bit of time chatting, and I found it great fun, because I was able to keep it from degenerating into that ugly “did/didn’t – is/isn’t” kind of argument, and we parted fairly amiably when we were done.

However, as we were sparring, I couldn’t help thinking of the text from Mark’s gospel that we heard this morning, a text that presents a woman arguing with Jesus. That’s a concept that would make a lot of Christians squirm, wouldn’t it – the idea that someone would dare to argue with Jesus, I mean. Many if not most people in the Church today think of Jesus’ ministry in images that are very peaceful and pastoral, with a gentle, smiling Jesus walking slowly along sunlit roads, grass and trees and flowers along the roadside, in the company of close friends and disciples hanging with rapt adoration on his every word, bluebirds singing softly as they circle laughingly around his head, just like in a Disney™ cartoon. All is gentle; all is peaceful; all is tenderness and sweetness and happiness and love.

Scripture paints a very different picture, however, for in the gospels we read of Jesus trying to get away from people, getting not only out of town but out of the country, hiding away in a house not wanting anyone to know he was there (don’t you ever wonder whose house, and how Jesus knew them, and about all those other little details? I do!) But even hiding away in a house in a foreign land he was not safe. When we actually read the bible we discover that it’s really no surprise Jesus went off to the region of Tyre to hide out for a bit ... he’s been rejected in his home town of Nazareth, his cousin John, the one called the Baptizer, has been arrested and executed, even the miracles of feeding thousands and walking on water have not had any effect on the religious, because they’re still fussing about rituals such as the disciples washing their hands!

There’s a deep irony that today’s images of an idyllic early church and a problem-free ministry of Jesus are so totally non-scriptural, in spite of so often being painted by those who would claim total and unerring obedience to scripture. The irony is that scripture paints a picture that is much more real, much more vibrant, much more alive than the soft pastoral watercolors. The Bible lays out a canvas covered in bright splashes, and dark colors, shrieking oranges and angry reds along with icy blues and brooding browns.

The early church that we see revealed in scripture is a hotbed of controversy and conflict, from the petty squabbles in individual congregations over who is more important than whom, to the deep-rooted fight between the Jerusalem Party (Peter, James, et. al.) who wanted to keep this new faith and the church that practiced it purely Jewish, unstained and unsullied, and between Paul and his supporters, who had a divine call not only to spread the word to the Gentiles but to welcome them into the fold.

That particular fight in the church over who was in and who was out, the fight over whether Gentiles, those unclean, unworthy, unacceptable foreigners, could legitimately be accepted and loved within the church raged for years. We see Jesus displaying God's position on the matter here in this incident of two healings, sandwiched between his miracle of feeding five thousand with five loaves of bread and two fish, and his feeding of four thousand with seven loaves and a few small fish.

Of course there are those Pharisees today who would miss the importance of all of this and focus instead on how the crowds had declined from one miracle to the next – from 5,000 to 4,000. Upset over Jesus not only talking to but touching, healing, even letting those unclean foreigners in, they would run around waving their hands in the air complaining “attendance is down by 20%!”

Sadly, that fight over who is and who is not acceptable in the church started at Day One, and has continued pretty much unabated until today, because even as I speak there seems to be no end to the conflict. Of course, at various times throughout the history of the church just who is was that was ‘unacceptable’ has changed: by times it was slaves who were declared to be less than human; most often it was women who were suppressed; foreigners and even people from the church in the next village were always suspect; today it's those with a different sexual orientation who are unwelcome in many parts of the church. The rich and powerful, at least the rich and powerful men, never seem to have been targets for exclusion from the church! And speaking of irony, today it is in the church's heartlands, the so-called Bible-Belts where “you're not welcome here” is proclaimed the loudest.

Thank God Jesus had a more inclusive view, as we see in our reading today. Let's take another look at this incident. Perhaps tired from displaying the miraculous power of God at work in him with the feeding of the five thousand; maybe worn down by calming not only the wind and the waves but his disciples' fears; possibly drained by healing the uncounted sick brought to him in villages or cities or farms; frustrated by the Pharisees, the crowds and even his own disciples not ‘getting it’ about rules, Jesus withdrew to a foreign land to hopefully find a bit of peace and calm. It appears not even his disciples were with him.

But there was no peace to be had for him even there. Confronted in the privacy of the house by a stranger, a foreigner, and a foreign woman at that, Jesus is called upon once again to demonstrate his healing power, as she throws herself at his feet and pleads for her daughter to be healed. And we are stunned by Jesus' answer. His reply to her is most unkind, as he not-so-subtly paints her and her kind as dogs, less even than children. Now those faithful Christians who would never, ever draw Jesus as anything but smiling and kind have a LOT of trouble with his answer, and so they either ignore it, or try to soften it by claiming that it was just a joke, or that Jesus was just exercising the woman's faith. Mark puts Jesus' answer right into our face, and hopefully he grabs our attention, because once we pay attention we cannot miss the grace that occurs. Whether Jesus reacts because the woman has enough faith in him to actually argue with him (and to the horror of those who claim to be scriptural but ignore scripture, God bless her – and He does!) or whether it just takes Jesus a minute to either clue in or just to pull it together, he grants her prayer and cures her daughter. No magic formula, as in the next example, the deaf mute, here Jesus simply declares that because she believed in him, her daughter is cured, and it is so. What Did Jesus Do? He responded to her faith, he displayed God's power in him, he flooded the ‘unacceptable’ woman with the grace of God.

And in case anyone might think it was a fluke, a one-time event based on that specific woman's personality, he healed another foreigner, curing a man of his deafness, and freeing his tongue. Dare we miss the fact that this man was not able to speak, and thus was unable to affirm his faith in Jesus before being healed? Or to put it another way, did you catch that Jesus healed the man without a spoken vow of faith? What does that scripture say to those who would claim that God's grace is only available to those who can believe strongly enough? What does this scripture say to those who declare that God's

forgiveness and healing is available only to those who profess their faith purely enough, only to those who pray with the right words?

Clearly, these two healing events that show God's grace, forgiveness and healing power acting to cure the unclean and impure signal that God's healing is for all. God's grace and forgiveness and healing is not just for rich and powerful men in the 'orthodox' faith. God's healing and forgiveness and grace is also for the poor, and for women, and even if not especially for poor women (remember the "widow's mite"?). God's healing and forgiveness and grace is available for slaves, and they are welcome. God's healing and forgiveness and grace is for all: male and female, Greek and Jew, rich and poor. God's healing and forgiveness and grace is for all who would believe in his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord, and who would simply accept that their sins are forgiven in Christ, their weaknesses are healed, that they also receive the gift of life abundant and eternal.

This is the message in scripture that those in the church today who claim to define and base and live their lives according to scripture need to hear. They, along with us, need to be reminded that because Jesus declared with his God-filled actions that God's healing is for all, that he because he was ready to accept all who believed in him, that he is willing still to accept all who believe in him, and moreover that we are called to follow his example. God's healing in Christ is for all: it is for the faithful, for the pure, for the righteous. But it is also for the sick; the lame, the untidy, the unclean, the scumbags – mercifully, God's healing in Christ is so much for all that it is even for us. He, who in fulfilling Isaiah's prophecy that "He has done everything well; he even makes the deaf to hear and the mute to speak", can open even our ears to the truth, and can free our voices to proclaim his mercy.

Be touched by Him; let him open our ears to hear that God's healing is for all, that all people are acceptable, even those whom we think are outside the boundaries – and if we are honest with ourselves we know that such people exist for us, whether family, friends, or even faithful. Let him free our tongues, so that we are no longer mute about what God has done for us in Christ, that others may hear, and come to believe, and come even to accept that God's healing in Christ, God's mercy and forgiveness, that God's grace is for all, even them, even us.