

## Little Dogs

(Refugee & Migrant Sunday) 28/8/2011 Bulleen BC  
Mark 7:24-30 (cf. Matthew 15:21-28)

What do you think of people who migrate from different regions of the world?

What do you think of multi-culturalism?

Is it something rather new in human history, a phenomenon of the 20th and 21st centuries, or something that has been around for centuries?

Do you think it really works, placing large numbers of people together from different ethnic, cultural and religious backgrounds and expecting them to live in perfect harmony?

What should the church's response be to the issues raised by multi-culturalism and how does it effect our attitude to, and practice of, mission?

Now I know it sounds a bit like a quiz, but I ask these questions before I introduce our reading for today.

Also, for a few minutes, I want us to think about 'Little Dogs'. Now, don't get me wrong. I am not talking about Chihuahuas, Pomeranians, terriers or the like.

I am talking about people. Yes, people who are part of people groups that some may feel are beneath them; not as advanced in their general living; and who are not as special to God as others.

Now, before there is general outrage at this obvious ethnic discrimination, let us read **Mark 7:24-30** and compare it with **Matthew 15:21-28**.

-----

It is not uncommon that, over many centuries, various people groups have given nick-names to other people groups, sometimes as a form of expression and sometimes as a form of insult.

Take for example how Vietnamese people were sometimes called (Gooks); Italians and Greeks were often called (Wops and Wogs); Germans were once called (Huns); Even today Americans are often called (Yanks); the English are known as (Poms); and of course Australians are frequently called Aussies. It pleases me today that many of these more offensive terms and expressions have now been removed from our general conversation.

In the days of Jesus however, human nature was much the same as today. Issues of prejudice, discrimination and elitism were just as prevalent then as now. The Jewish people of history have often understood themselves as special to God, as God's only Chosen People and superior to all others. (cf. Ezek.34:11-12; Jn.21:16-17). They also referred to some of the surrounding people groups as 'little dogs'.

How do you think these people liked this description? Not very well! It was an insult, in that it not only denigrated the people themselves as scavengers, but also belittled their culture.

It has often been argued that Jesus only ever ministered to his own people, the Jews; BUT, when we search the gospels we discover quite a few occasions when he not only travelled outside of Jewish territory but interacted with people who were not of Jewish ancestry.

One such example is this encounter with the Syro-Phoenician woman. She was from the region of Tyre and Sidon on the Eastern Mediterranean coast and she has been described as both Canaanite and Greek.

Obviously, her heritage reflects the ancient Canaanites who, for centuries, had fought against Israel and who were finally subjugated under the rule of the Greek Empire, during the time of Alexander the Great; which was then usurped by the rise of the Roman Empire.

The Jews had a long standing hatred of the Canaanites, the Syro-Phoenicians. They reviled their cultic practices, like cult prostitution and infanticide (child sacrifice), and would have nothing to do with them as a people. It was a bitter relationship between neighbours that exists even today, because it is these people who were the ancestors of many of today's Palestinian people.

It was into this situation that Jesus travelled with his disciples to the region of Tyre and Sidon.

We presume that he went there to have a break from the crowds of people that constantly pursued him, because we read, "He entered a house and wanted no one to know it ..". (vs.24)

This Syro-Phoenician woman, a non-Jew, somehow discovered that Jesus was in the region and came to him with a petition to heal her troubled daughter. She obviously did not reciprocate the feelings of prejudice or think that she, or her culture, was superior to all others. She only thought of the well-being of her daughter, and had obviously been impressed with the reports she had heard concerning Jesus.

Despite the efforts of the disciples to get rid of the woman, she was persistent in her petition. Finally, Jesus addressed the woman and said to her, "I have been sent to the lost sheep of the house of Israel". This was the typical Jewish line that the gifts of God are for the people of God - the Jews.

You know, even today, there are some who think that western civilisation is superior to all others, and that the church in western Anglo based countries should only focus on their own. Expressions like, 'charity begins at home', are often meant to mean, 'charity should be limited to home'.

Still the woman persisted, "Lord, help me!"

Jesus then made this amazing derogatory and prejudicial statement. We cannot imagine that he said it to cause offence to the woman but to demonstrate an important lesson to his disciples.

He said, "It is not good to take the children's bread and throw it to the little dogs."

Any Jew hearing this would have been pleased and smiled at the 'put-down' of this woman and her culture. Jesus had called her a little dog.

The woman's response however was like a knife that pieced and cut through all of the prejudice and hatred of centuries. She did not revile against what was said, she did not respond with anger and malice.

In humility and courage she accepted the use of the imagery and replied, "Yes, Lord, yet even the little dogs under the table eat from the children's crumbs."

Though her culture and traditions were very different from those of the Jews, this woman recognised in Jesus something that was pure, right and from God. Jesus knew that the woman's heart was responding to God. Though her knowledge and understanding of the things of God were still so limited, her faith was not subject to learned reason and rationale.

It was as a result of this woman's faith response to Jesus that she now began a life journey of discovering the true nature and person of God.

As a result of the woman's incredible faith and courage, Jesus declared that her daughter was now healed and whole.

Today, the work of the church, which includes Christian Mission, is just as important and vital as it ever has been. Every new generation, regardless of ethnicity and geography, needs to hear the message, and know the love, of God in the Lord Jesus Christ.

We do not go out, crossing ethnic or cultural barriers because we think these people are beneath us or lesser beings, and only deserving the crumbs of our charity to earn merit for ourselves.

All people are just as loved, special and cherished by God as we are, and He desires that they come to know and treasure Him as we do.

We should not place on them the restrictions that faith is subject to the intellectual acceptance of a set of doctrinal statements or theological precepts.

Each person comes to faith as God works in their lives. As such, things like dreams, visions and spiritual encounters often form part of the witness of the growing church in many places today.

In our reasoning and knowledge focused culture, this may sound strange, but, was it strange for Moses as God spoke to him through a burning bush. Was it strange for Saul as he was blinded on the road to Damascus. Was it strange for some of our Chinese friends who have received powerful dreams that have forever changed their lives in their walk with the Lord.

Are we as open, in our lives, for God to break through to renew and revitalise us in our service and witness for Him?

John 4:24 tells us that God is Spirit, and therefore He will not be contained nor constrained by our theologies and theories of pure reason.

Nor will he be hindered by our limitations of mind or experience.

Just as the Syro-Phoenician woman broke free from the stereotypes and cultural expectations that had been placed upon her; and the disciples saw in the example of Jesus a loving response and caring attitude toward others, so we can break free from the stereotypes and cultural expectations that can bind, limit and hinder us.

Just as the days of the missionary in a safari suit have passed, so we can put aside the modern humanist do-gooder image that looks at other people groups and cultures, only to offer our so called superior western culture as a solution, or earn merit for ourselves in the eyes of others, through our charitable words and actions.

What this story of Jesus tells us is that, instead of following the worldly secular humanist model, the church today, as well as our efforts for wider mission, needs to dare to envision new and creative ways to share the powerful life-changing message of Jesus with all those who do not yet know Him.

To do this, we need to engage with the Lord in both targeted prayer and action, to once again have an impact for God in this generation and those to come. Make no mistake, in Christ Jesus, this is our task; and this is our calling, in His name.

Amen