

Sermon Monarto 8th September 2024

The Text: Mark 7:24-30

In most sports you have what is called the 'field of play' – the place where the action happens. When you go outside that field of play then you are 'out of bounds'. In cricket, football and soccer you have an oval with a clearly marked boundary line. In tennis, netball and basketball you have a court that is similarly marked with various lines. In golf there is a course you try to keep to and in motor racing there is a track that is advisable to remain on.

Outside of sport we also have our respective fields of play that we operate in with our lives. There are places and situations where you expect to find us and places and situations where you don't. These boundary lines are not clearly marked with paint and we might not even be fully conscious of them. But we still operate largely within them. It includes the people we normally choose to associate with and the activities we usually choose to be engaged in. We have set certain limits and they form the territory that we are comfortable operating in.

Our Gospel reading dealt with territorial issues. Of course, Jesus had a reputation for pushing the boundary lines. Plenty of religious leaders felt he had overstepped the mark on more than one occasion and he had been criticized as a result of it. Jesus did some provocative things at times in order to teach deeper truths about God's kingdom.

But in our Gospel account from Mark 7 this had not been his intention. Jesus was trying to leave the field of play and step out of bounds for a while – a bit like half time in a sporting match. The vicinity of Tyre was non-Jewish territory. It was not his sphere of activity. So he didn't want anyone to know he was there. As we heard: *"He entered a house and did not want anyone to know it"*. We also heard how that went for him: *"yet he could not keep his presence secret"*. Word got around and that word came to the

ears of a Greek woman from Syrian Phoenicia. And *“as soon as she heard about him...she came and fell at his feet”*.

This woman was not like an autograph hunter who tracks down a sports star when they are trying to enjoy some time away from the field of play. This was a woman who had a daughter possessed by an unclean spirit – and all of the stigma attached to that. She was desperate to receive healing for her daughter.

So we'd expect that, even though Jesus wanted to remain incognito, he would respond favourably to her plea. When crowds had tracked him down during his solitude times in the past he still had compassion on them. But that isn't what happened here, is it! Jesus rejected her plea. Why was that? It wasn't because she was a woman – Jesus had been counter-cultural in that regard. It wasn't because of a particular sin or because it was an unclean spirit. Jesus went out of his way to cross those particular boundaries.

So that leaves the religious/cultural barrier – the fact she was a *“Greek woman from Syrian Phoenicia”*; the fact she was a non-Jew.

Again we would go ‘so what’, wouldn't we? Sure we get the seemingly insurmountable religious/cultural differences and sensitivities at play here. But God so loved the **world** that he gave his one and only Son, didn't he?

When the baby Jesus was presented at the Temple Simeon could say: *“my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the sight of **all nations**: a light for revelation to **the Gentiles**, and the glory of your people Israel”* (Luke 2:30-32).

God's salvation in Jesus was for Gentile and Jew alike; it was for all nations.

That was certainly God's salvation plan – but it was also God's plan to start with the children of Israel and move out from there. Ultimately this woman was in God's game plan – but she had just turned up a little early. Jesus was not on a mission in this place at this time. This was not his field of play, yet.

That is why Jesus told her: *“First let the children eat all they want, for it is not right to take the children’s bread and toss it to the dogs”* (v27). It sounds very offensive to our sensitive 21st century ears, doesn’t it! You can imagine the media frenzy if a church leader started throwing around comments like that in our society. But this woman didn’t take offence. She knew the cultural and religious boundaries that were in play. She knew she had no right to request what Jesus had to offer. She replied: *“Lord, even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs.”*

This woman wasn’t asking for the full blessings of the Messianic ministry that belonged to the children of Israel. She was not that presumptuous. She was not asking for the bread: only the crumbs. She wanted a once off favour from Jesus not a lifelong blessing. She was asking for Jesus to make an exception: not a rule.

Maybe that is why Jesus was so reluctant. It would have been so easy to have just granted the woman’s wish and given her the crumbs she was after. If he had said nothing and just done it the incident may have been quickly overlooked and forgotten.

In the Matthew account of this incident you have Jesus initially ignoring her completely. It is his disciples who urge him to ‘send her away’. They probably would have been satisfied enough if he had thrown her this morsel just to get her out of their faces.

But Jesus didn’t want this woman and people like her ‘out of his face’. They were part of his ultimate mission to bring all people before God’s face. He had not come to give the Jews the bread whilst everyone else would have the leftover crumbs.

His death and resurrection would enable all people to be drawn into God’s kingdom. His death and resurrection would enable all people to be given a seat at the heavenly Father’s banquet. But it hadn’t happened yet.

If Jesus sent this woman away with just the crumbs she was after then it could reinforce the belief that the Messiah was for the Jews alone. Jesus was rejecting her request for crumbs because she was destined to receive more than that. When Jesus had

finished his final play, she would find herself with a place at the table.

Despite this Jesus ended up healing her daughter, and he also signalled to her and his followers that a far greater miracle was about to unfold. This woman would not be left with crumbs. In Matthew's account he commended her for her "*great faith*".

On the table is the full smorgasbord of salvation that's accessible to all people through faith in Jesus. On the table is the opportunity to belong to God's family and the complete healing and wholeness and hope that comes with that. On the table is eternal life rather than just a temporary improvement in the quality of it. That is what Jesus wanted this woman to walk away with. That is what Jesus wants everyone to walk away with.

There are no boundaries to the life Jesus has come to bring. There is no limit to his acceptance and compassion, no limit to his desire to heal and forgive and love. There is nowhere and no one who sits outside his field of play. This woman and her daughter were not to be seen as an exception but as the new rule. The time was about to come when all who called on Jesus in faith would receive his full mercy and blessing. Surely that time is now! As 21st century followers of Jesus what do we learn from this? We might think we have it so much more together than our 1st century counterparts. We live in a multi-cultural society where acceptance is the order of the day. We don't have the same religious-cultural boundaries and restrictions that were evident back then, do we! That is true, but we can always be challenged to think about the boundaries and limits we do still exercise in our lives.

We probably do still stay within certain fields of play without even being conscious of it. We might understand in theory that the full blessings of God's kingdom are available to all the peoples of the earth through what Jesus has done.

But what does that mean in practice for us? Do we cross the boundaries and enact that Gospel to all the people we encounter in our lives? Do we pick and choose who we are going to have faith conversations with? Do we consciously see every person that we encounter as someone who needs the grace of Jesus in their lives?

I wonder whether we have been content to throw people the crumbs of God's kingdom. We seem to be satisfied if we can live by example and have people look favourably on us as Christians and see us as nice people because of what we do and how we live.

Is there anything wrong with that? Of course not! But when we don't look for an opportunity to also share the good news of Jesus and the eternal life he brings, then I wonder whether we've been content to leave them with the crumbs of our good works, rather than drawing them to see the fullness of a relationship with God.

We can do the same when we are satisfied that non-Christians are sending their children to our Sunday schools, kids clubs, Lutheran schools and youth groups because they admire our Christian morals. I also admire our Christian morals and ethics. But if children walk away from our church and school activities with just a moral code to live by then we have sent them away with crumbs, haven't we? Surely we want all people to have a faith relationship with Jesus because he has a smorgasbord of grace and blessing that is to be experienced and enjoyed in every aspect of our lives.

We don't bear the crumbs of God's grace to our world but we invite all people to share a seat with us at God's heavenly banquet. We rejoice when someone enters into a faith relationship with Jesus. We rejoice when someone discovers that Jesus is a far more comprehensive truth than they could ever have imagined. We rejoice when someone experiences the fullness of life in Jesus where he far exceeds our limited expectations.

The boundary lines have shifted and the whole world comes under the jurisdiction of Jesus. Even now Jesus is reaching out to embrace all the people of the world so they too can come to know him and the riches of his grace. May we be willing to push the boundaries in our lives and in our dealings with others, so the love, acceptance and blessings of Jesus' kingdom can come to others through us! Amen.