

DATE: Sunday September 5, 2021
CHURCH: St Matthew's Kensington.
SERMON SERIES. Lectionary Gospel Readings
BIBLE PASSAGE: Mark 7:24 - 30
GENERAL THEME/TOPIC: Miracles

This will be a funny sort of address – not really a sermon as such with 3 points and a poem and a challenge for living. I want to give the background to the incident recorded in our gospel reading, and then do some wondering about what we have read there.

(2) Background.

When Valerie and I had the chance to visit Israel, we developed a whole new appreciation for the geographical details of the Bible. There are some very simple statements that are not simple at all. At the start of today's gospel reading we had this simple statement, "And from there (Capernaum) Jesus arose and went away to the region of Tyre and Sidon." Jesus had done his criticism of the ritual hand-washing of the scribes and Pharisees in Capernaum, and now went to Tyre. Dead easy. But as the crow flies it's a journey of 56 kilometres. It wasn't a straight line, and there were hills and mountains in the way. And Jesus walked it. The walking distance could have been something like 65 to 70 kilometres. That's from Adelaide to Kapunda. And Jesus walked it. What ... 2 days? 3 days? It was not simple at all.

It seems as though his time in Tyre was to meant to be rest and recreation for Jesus, because he didn't want anyone to know that he was there. But there was a mother with a sick daughter – and mothers with sick daughters are forces to be reckoned with. The young girl was "**possessed by a demon.**" We're not at all sure what that means. Was she mentally ill? Did she have a medical condition that caused her to spasm and to jerk? Did she have panic attacks? Was she bipolar? There are many possible answers. We know that back in Jesus' day many conditions for which we have medical diagnoses today were lumped together under the heading of "demon possession" – unnatural behaviour.

Tyre was a long way from Jerusalem where Jesus was probably well known. In fact Tyre was 165 kilometres north-north-west of Jerusalem. And **Jesus' reputation** had spread as far distanced as this – into Gentile territory. And here was a gentile woman who clearly knew of Jesus' reputation, and came to enlist his help for her sick girl. Jesus had helped the woman of Samaria. Jesus helped this Syro-Phoenician woman of Tyre. This would really have got the Scribes and Pharisees annoyed – Jesus was dealing with gentiles and with women. And it is as a result of **Jesus' contact that the place and role of women were given dignity and status that they never had before in Jewish society.** We take it all for granted now – but we need to recognise the risk that Jesus took to assist women, and give them the honoured place in society that they now have – a place that is not held by women still in some parts of the world where the touch of Christ has not been allowed to settle.

The woman entered into conversation with Jesus. She was not going to take "No" for an answer for her little girl, even though initially Jesus made it really difficult. "Help my daughter," she said. Jesus gave a rather off-colour reply. "Let the children first be fed. It is not right to take the children's bread and **throw it to the dogs.**" That was typical of a Jewish person's attitude to gentiles. But Jesus used a different word that we have translated as "dogs." [It is the word "kunaros". A little dog. The usual word for a dog is "ku-own."] The word Jesus used means a pet dog, a lap dog. In Jesus' day there were no knives and forks; people ate with their hands, and they wiped their soiled hands on chunks of bread that they

then gave to the house-dogs to eat. So the woman said, "I know that the children are fed first – but can't I even get the *scraps* that the children throw away?" The children were the Jews, the little dogs were the gentiles. And the woman used a clever, witty play on words here, too - - - she called Jesus by the title "Lord." She used the title *Kurios*. *Kurios* and *Kunarios*. Homonyms. "Yes, *Kurios* but *kunarios* receive the scraps." And Jesus responded to her reply, responded to her plea, delighted in her wit, and responded to her faith. "For this saying you may go your way; the demon has left your daughter." (Mark 7:29).

There was another time when, without being physically present, Jesus effected the healing in Capernaum of a centurion's servant on the basis of what the centurion had said. It's in Matthew 8.5-13.

(2) The wondering about what we have read. Miracles – what are they? Miracles are a supernatural events that seem unable to be explained by natural or scientific laws. In general speech the word "miracle" is often used to describe any beneficial event that is statistically unlikely - but not contrary to the laws of nature, such as surviving a natural disaster, or simply a "wonderful" occurrence such as "the miracle of childbirth". Many writers dismiss miracles as physically impossible because they require that established laws of physics be violated, or they say that miracles are impossible to confirm because all possible physical mechanisms can never be ruled out.

This healing of the daughter of the woman from Tyre would be regarded as a miracle.

The questions for those of us who try to take our faith seriously is, "Did miracles happen?" and "Do miracles happen"? and "How should we pray for miracles"?

Did miracles happen? We have what the Bible's description of events and about this event. A healing certainly took place – the mother of the little girl would have known if it hadn't taken place. It seems unable to be explained by natural or scientific laws as they were known at the time, and maybe even as they are known these days. John's gospel calls such events "signs," signs that the kingdom of God was breaking in on the world in the ministry of Jesus. So ... did miracles happen? My reply is that I believe that they did.

Do miracles happen? In these days of scientific know-how, medical advances, understanding of micro-organisms, and so forth, is there still room to believe that events occur that can't be explained by natural or scientific laws? Or ... do the natural forces and laws that have been built into the world and the universe by our Creator God now govern and explain everything that occurs in us and around us? My reply is that I believe that they can happen.

How do we pray for miracles? I believe that we don't. I believe that we admit that our great desire is that such and such a person may be healed, or that such and such an event may be resolved. Having put our desires on the table before God, I believe that we then simply commit into the loving hands of our loving God whoever and whatever it is that is on our heart, and pray that God's will for that person and circumstance will be done ... and that we will have the faith and the grace to accept God's loving will. In the end, that's what this mother in Tyre did for her little girl.

Is this unsatisfactory? It may be. This is an area where those of us who have committed our lives to Christ by faith seek to understand to the best of our ability what are the ramifications of our 21st century faith. If the answers we come up with are not complete, or don't fit our

thoughts, then we must continue to think them through, and determine that, no matter what, we shall follow Christ as thoughtfully and as educatedly and as fully as we have the strength to do, as so many of God's people have done down through the centuries.

May we have faith as keen and as strong as the mother from Tyre.

(1343 words)