

MARK 7:24-37
CRUMBS OF GRACE

Have you ever had the experience of being left out? Was there a time when you were not part of the group and were made to feel as if you didn't belong? Or you were the last to be picked for the football team or whatever team was on the go? Everybody else belongs to the group, but for some reason, you don't! I hear so many stories from teenagers at school, with the stress of being ignored by people who they thought were friends and who are now being left out of the group! It is hard and it hurts. Who is in? Who is out? Imagine a circle on the ground and here are some people in the world in which we live: by our culture, by the standards of the world who belongs in the circle? Who belongs outside? The rich person and poor person – who is inside or outside? The smart or the shabby? The adult or the child? Herod or the shepherd from the Christmas story? The old person or the young person? What does it feel like to be always left out? What does it feel like to be on the margins and be left to feel unloved and unwanted? These are big issues that touch more people than we realise.

In our story from Mark 7 today, Jesus meets two people who are on the outside, but who come looking for grace. The easy answer to our question is to say that everyone should be on the inside, but we have to see how to get there. Even with Jesus that's not always straightforward. He brings grace to these two people on the outside and brings them in; they find grace and their prayers are answered; Jesus loves them and cares for them. Here are two stories that are not always straightforward and easy to understand; we need to use our imagination a little bit to see what goes on in these conversations. People who were left on the outside are brought in; people for whom some would have placed them outside the grace and blessing of God, are brought inside. They rejoice to meet Jesus.

Jesus has gone North! He has gone to the city of Tyre, It is a Gentile city, a seaport; He has gone to try to get some rest and respite from the demands of ministry; is He trying to be there in secret? But people soon found out that He was there. A woman comes to him to ask Him for help for her daughter. *"The woman..."* (Mark 7:26) There are three reasons why she would be on the outside: her gender – women were very much second class citizens in first century Jewish society; her nationality – she was a Greek, a Gentile, everyone who was not a Jew; her place of birth – Syrian Phoenicia was at the very least outside Israel and at the worst of times had been Israel's enemies. The classic Jewish man's prayer emphasises all of that: "thank God that I am not a Gentile, a woman, or a dog!" She is very much on the outside and yet she comes to Jesus looking for help. We need to look at this story quite carefully to understand what's going on here.

First of all there is the actual conversation: the woman comes asking Jesus to heal her daughter; Jesus replies, *"First let..."* (Mark 7:27) This is about His mission, which was to the Jews first and so Jesus appears to be saying that He has come to bring grace to Israel, as the people of God and they are His priority and there is no grace for those outside! Her counter: *"Yes, Lord..."* (Mark 7:28) It is a sharp riposte; you get the picture? The pet dog is sitting under the table while the family are at tea and the crumbs that get dropped off the table are snapped up by the dog; you don't need to Hoover the carpet when you have a dog! This is how she sees herself; picking up the crumbs of grace that are falling off the table when being given to other people. *"For such..."* (Mark 7:29) Her trust in Jesus is whole-hearted; she trusts Him completely and she goes home to find her daughter healed; Jesus has graced her and answered her prayers completely. That's the conversation, but what else is going on here?

What kind of idea of Jesus do we have here? Some of what I've read this week leaves me with some questions. Some of the books have described Jesus' "apparent coldness" towards the woman and that somehow this coldness made her even more determined to succeed! Or they write about His "harsh refusal" of her initial request which means that against the odds she doesn't give up but forces her way through the chinks of a closed door. It was said that

Jesus is very clear about the limits of His mission and so He behaves like this, trying to keep the woman out because it was not God's purpose to give grace beyond Israel. But there is another way: yes, grace is to Israel first in God's plan but for Jesus that has never been exclusive. So He says to the woman that the bread is for the children because that's what she expects the Jewish male rabbi to say. But there is something about Jesus, in His body language perhaps, that encourages her to come back and the "crumbs under table" line shows Jesus just how strong her faith is and so He rewards her faith, her persistence, her determination. Is there a twinkle in his eye as He says what she expects to hear? Is there a twinkle in her eye as she realises that He is offering her grace for herself and her child?

People look at the church and they think they know what we will say to them about their life, their world, their faults and failings; they think they know what we will say to them and how we will react; usually they think that we will shout at them for their failures and tell them off for what they've not done. Sadly, sometimes churches live down to that expectation. But when these same people come to Jesus and listen to what He has to say, it's a quite different story. People who have been on the outside are welcomed in; people who consider themselves to be failures are told about forgiveness and a new sense of freedom; people who consider that no-one really cares for them are loved in a way that they scarcely believed possible. It takes them by surprise because it is not what they expected from the church, from Jesus; grace is offered, love when we don't deserve to be loved and it's for us.

Disability is nothing new! This man's friends brought him to Jesus. He is deaf; he has a speech impediment; he is cut off from the world because communication is almost impossible. Is he not able to work; was he begging? Was he poor? Does he have a family, or is he disowned because of his disability? Is it simply his friends who care for him? The friends bring him and ask Jesus to heal him. Jesus begins to communicate: he puts His fingers in the man's ears – "I'm going to do something to your ears" when words are useless because the man is deaf. He touches his tongue – "I'm going to do something with your speech!" He lifts His eyes up to heaven – "I'm going to pray and ask God for grace" Jesus speaks one word: "*Ephphatha*" "Be opened" and everything that had held this man a prisoner inside his own body, inside his own disability is gone; he is healed; he has new life from Jesus!

Here's a fascinating thing: these two people in need of grace were brought to Jesus by other people. The girl is brought by her mum; she is not physically in the room, but the daughter's need is brought to Jesus by her mum; Jesus answers her mum's prayers on behalf of her daughter. The disabled man is brought by his friends and the same thing is true. We have a huge gift of prayer: we can bring people to Jesus by our prayers. Often prayer is seen as a last resort, but it should be the first response to either our own need or the need of someone else. We bring people to Jesus when we pray; they might not be in the room, they might be on the other side of the world, but this is what we do when we pray for people, people we know, people whose names we know, people who are complete strangers to us. We have the privilege of bringing people to Jesus, looking for grace for their needs. Don't balk at that ministry of prayer; it is hugely important and it touches lives in ways we may never know.

Grace is for everyone; everyone belongs inside the circle, no matter who they are. Smart or shabby – it doesn't matter, there is a place inside; rich or poor; old or young; adult or child; even Herod or the shepherd – there would have been a place inside the grace of God if Herod's heart had been open. There is a place for everyone in the circle; grace is offered to everyone no matter who they are. The challenge for the church is to make that true in practice. Do we send out the message that we welcome young people more readily than old people because we are worried about the future of the church? I was in a building the other day in which the acoustics were so bad that anyone who was deaf would have struggled to engage with anything that was being said. How do we do worship for people who find it hard to listen for a long time, or who respond to pictures more than spoken word? How do we take grace outside the building to people who are housebound, to families under stress, to people who

wonder if they need a ticket to come to church and where do we buy them? Grace, even if seems to be crumbs of grace, is for everyone.

The picture on the screen is called a mandala, a circle picture created by an artist reflecting on sacred writing. What do you see in the picture? This mandala is based on Isaiah 35: *“then will...”* (Isaiah 35:5f) What do you see? God is at work in the world to bring grace to people wherever they are; we are called to share grace with people wherever we meet them; there is a place at the table for everyone who wants it. That’s what we see today in Jesus: two people who were on the outside of the circle as far as other people were concerned, yet Jesus brought them in; there was grace for both of them, even if it seemed only crumbs; their prayers were answered. There is grace for all of us from Jesus, even if we don’t think we’re good enough, or feel unloved, or feel on the outside. Here is grace for all of us whether we’re here every week, or we’ve come to church today for the first time and we’re not sure why! There is grace for us that meets our deepest needs; Jesus listens to our prayers for ourselves or for others. Grace is for all of us.

