

I just want to leave you today with a few things to think about concerning our passage :

First have a think about the geography. If necessary go home and look at these places on an ancient map. In doing so we get more of a sense of what's going on. The passage says "Jesus set out and went away to the region of Tyre." That sounds like Jesus is just on the move again, but this is major trip! We mostly have stories of Jesus teaching and healing around Galilee – staying within a few miles of the large lake in the northern part of Israel. But Tyre is on the Mediterranean Sea – more than 30 miles from Galilee, and he does not have a car.

Moreover, Tyre was a Greek city, and the Greeks called it "Phoenicia," Phoenicia comes from the word purple, because along that stretch of coastline there was a shellfish which the people were able to extract a purple dye which was then exported around the known world for dying fabrics.

So Jesus goes to Tyre, this port city – "Phoenicia" - basically to a foreign country; but then it goes on to say that Jesus returns to Galilee by way of Sidon. Again look at your maps. Sidon is also on the coast. That's like me going from here to Belfast but going via Larne. It doesn't make sense unless you have something to do there. For me this is Jesus broadening his reach, expanding his circle. There is a subtle message here: God is at work beyond the local, beyond the Jews, beyond the familiar.

Second, this is not just about geography; there are some troubling happenings in this passage. A sincere Syrophenician woman seeks help from Jesus. At first Jesus ignores her. He has come to the region to get away, it seems, from the crowds. Yet he could not escape notice. Even Syrophenician women have learned about Jesus and his amazing ways. This particular one pursues Jesus in the house as he seeks rest.

The dialogue between Jesus and this Syrophenician woman is quite rude really. Is Jesus a racist? Is the Savoir of the world really talking with such disdain?

Let's look more closely at the dialogue. Verse 25b 'and she came and bowed down at his feet. Now the woman was a Gentile, of Syrophenician origin. She begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter. 27He said to her, 'Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs.' 28But she answered him, 'Sir,\* even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs.'

So she comes and bows at his feet. She does not force herself on Jesus, she submits to Jesus. She recognises his power and she responds in a way that all of us should when we recognise the power that Jesus has. Further to that, she is a Gentile seeking a favour from a Jew. That is a big step for anyone, but it helps us realise that we all have to get over our own issues and submit to Jesus who offers us wholeness.

But then Jesus' response is stunning, maybe jarring. "Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." Why did he say this?

Well many commentators make note here that historically the Jews would have referred to the gentiles as dogs. Does that make Jesus' words unfair and hurtful? Well I think it is more connected to Jesus' call to reach out to the Jews first and then the gentiles.

But then her response is both moving and magnificent. Even the dogs get the crumbs. Even the Gentiles are in need and receptive of God's abiding love. Even those in Phoenicia and Tyre are seeking WHOLENESS.

"For saying that," Jesus says, "the demon has left your daughter."

Can you see why people found this passage meaningful?

God's steadfast love, God's abiding care, are for all people everywhere. We have to always keep this in mind – because all of us – can shrink our hearts and assume that God's plans only include our region, our kind of people, our country, our heritage, our needs, our timing, even for those who reject him. God's plans, God's love, God's purposes for healing and WHOLENESS are for everyone and forever.

Can you see why people found this passage meaningful? The expansive love and plans of God are always bigger, more bountiful than we can ever imagine. Prejudice, barriers, boundaries, insults – this story is remembered because healing, compassion, and WHOLENESS carry the day. And we have to keep learning this.

We live in a world of continuing prejudice, barriers, boundaries, and insults. What does God expect from us as we seek WHOLENESS? It is compassion, kindness, concern for justice, openness to God – that is the way to WHOLENESS.

The passage continues with another healing story. In this miracle and healing, there is no debate about who can talk to whom, or who is deserving of healing, or worries about boundaries, or any of that. Jesus takes the man aside and gets quite personal, quite intimate. There are fingers in ears, spitting and touching the tongue with saliva, casting eyes toward heaven, and the shouting of a word – "*ephphatha*." The man's ears are opened and his tongue is released and he spoke plainly! Moreover, the crowd is astonished.

All of this is another sign that the Kingdom of God - The reign of God – healing and WHOLENESS – hearing and speaking, release from that which holds us captive – through Jesus – is emerging in the world. The people say – "Wow! He has done everything well – the deaf hear, the mute speak!" Jesus is demonstrating the full reign of God.

These two healing stories I think come at an opportune time for all of us. Our community has been dealing with grief and loss through the pandemic, and the worries are still there. And now I believe instead of people moving back into the routines that they had before the pandemic, now is a time to declare the healing and wholeness that comes from God for a confused world.

God's plans for healing and WHOLENESS are not just for some, for a certain tribe, or a certain kind of people. God's plans for WHOLENESS are for all of us, and for

everyone. We are invited to the kind of persistent and expectant faith, like the Syrophenician woman, whose courage and conviction brought her daughter to a place of healing. We are invited to have the faith and the courage of those who brought the deaf-mute man to Jesus. So many need the releasing, redemptive love of God to touch and heal their lives.

How much does the world need people who live by faith, who spread compassion and hope, who seek to embody the light, love, peace that Jesus brings. Let's declare that around people we meet, and invite them along to Alpha or to Church where they can discover the wholeness that is available to all and only comes from Jesus.