

Faithful, Heartfelt, Persistent Prayer

A sermon given on the 14th Sunday of Trinity, 5th September 2021, by Mrs Catherine Drake, in the Online Attended Communion Service.

Mark 7:24-end

The 'Reader' Ministry

As Jonathan has already said this morning, today is Reader Sunday, and when I'm wearing my gowns, you can see that I am a reader. So before I talk about our gospel reading today, I'd like to really spend just a few minutes talking about who we are and what we do (a bit of a promotion really - it's the one Sunday of the year that we can promote the ministry of 'Reader'). Let's address the title first, which is a bit confusing to some people and has to be explained to almost everybody, especially those who don't attend Church. It is an ancient mediaeval title that was abolished at the Reformation and then revived again in 1866. But since then a lot about the Ministry has changed, including the Church, and the inclusion of women in 1969 was a big change to. Because the title 'reader' doesn't really describe what we're called to do. There are currently recommendations to change the title after all those years, all those centuries to 'Licenced Lay Minister' (L-L-M.) And some dioceses have already actually taken this on, they've adopted it. But for now let's stick to the title of reader. Readers are ordinary people, the Church of England from all walks of life and we're theologically trained and licenced by the Church to preach, to teach, to lead worship, and assist in pastoral, evangelistic and liturgical work. So a bit of everything, really. And we're basically members of the congregation who feel called - but importantly, we don't feel called to full time Ministry or to be ordained. Most of us don't want to give up our ,day jobs. Originally, readers were the only ones who belong to the outside world of work and we were seen as those who could preach and address issues that face people in our congregations as one of them. Of course, this has changed. Originally, all clergy were full time and now there are many non-stipendary clergy, and they also belong to the workplace. The sense of 'I think God might be asking me to do this' is the first step to becoming a reader. Following a time of discernment and prayer, support from your family, which is very important and discussions with your vicar, you're then interviewed by a selection panel. They're not scary; they're not there to weed out the unsuitable - that's God's job. We only have to look at the first disciples to see that God doesn't call the brightest and the best. The only qualification needed is a heart that really wants to serve Him. The panel is there to help you to discern

your call and they will pray with you. The training is part time and initially takes four years as you study for a foundation degree in theology and ministry, while at the same time undertaking practical training in your own home Church. After being licenced by the Archbishop in a really lovely service, you give in that important piece of paper, which is a licence to preach and teach. And every Reader's Ministry is different, not just because every Church is different because but because we are too. And just like everyone in the Church, were parts of the body and have different gifts. So if anyone sitting out there today and something I've said maybe has interested them or equally, if anything I've said has put you off, please do find me at the end of the service and come and talk to me.

Mark's Gospel Reading

So let's turn to our gospel reading today - I'm going to share with you what stands out for me in these stories. Jesus is on the move and we find him today in Tyre, which is Gentile country. It's possible he was looking for some solitude. But even in this Gentile region, it seems, word has spread about him and he can't escape demands for his healing power.

First we have the encounter with a Syrophenician woman. It appears she recognises somehow a certain abundance about the things Jesus is up to. She doesn't demand to be treated as one of the chosen ones, but she wants some of that abundance, "Look, I'm not asking for a seat at the table, but my daughter's suffering. All I need is a word or two from you. I know that will be enough." I think this woman shows a certain kind of faith, doesn't she? Perhaps she can even expand our understanding of faith through her sheer persistence. She has hopeful insight. She refuses to believe a tiny speck of Grace isn't out of reach for her. And knowing that just that speck can make the difference for her, she refuses to go away until she gets what she came for, and in the end has trusting acceptance. She is willing to take Jesus at His word, and to journey home alone to confirm her daughter's healing. Perhaps she can teach us something about praying, too. In her dialogue with Jesus, she takes the attitude of a trusting child, but she's also desperate, and she's persistent.

Who's to say that things like desperation and tenacity aren't the same thing as faith, when that desperation and tenacity are brought to Jesus?

From Tyre, Jesus heads off to the region of the Decapolis, the Ten cities still in Gentile territory. Perhaps he's still seeking to escape notice and take some rest - the text suggests this. But once again it proves impossible. And we go from the story of the

deliverance to one of healing, about something most of us are more familiar with, a story about someone whose deaf and has a speech impediment. Jesus heals the man and fulfils the prophecy of the Prophet Isaiah, who said that when the expected Messiah or Saviour arrived, the eyes of the blind would be opened and the ears of the deaf unstopped. I think it's important to see here and to recognise that Jesus didn't use his healing powers as proofs of His divinity they were signs for then and for now to display God's great love and concern for us.

I think what stands out for me most about this particular healing and what I love about it, is that the initiative for this miracle didn't come from the deaf man himself. It was others who brought Jesus to him and we read begged him to lay his hands on him. Others pleaded on his behalf. For me, that's the key message that I take from these two stories: the need to come and take others to God in prayer.

We know that God is active in the world, breaking through in amazing supernatural ways, and these stories increase my confidence in bringing people to God in prayer and should be encouraging to all of us who are praying for people and for situations that we feel helpless about, and especially when we're praying for people ,who for whatever reason, aren't praying for themselves - people who doubt, who've lost their faith and those with no faith at all.

I want to close by really encouraging everyone today to pray persistent persevering prayers. I'm not talking about repetitious prayers here, but prayers that refuse to give up, that come from the heart.

Of course, there are lots of different ways we can pray and we don't even have to use words. We can come into God's presence and sit in silence because, you know, it's possible to use our mouth to speak words of prayer that have no meaning at all behind them. And these prayers are nothing but dead works. I myself could probably quite the entire Lord's prayer while I'm thinking about something else entirely, and that wouldn't bless God or do me any good at all. Words spoken in prayer that are not connected to our hearts, are words without power.

But if we're sincere and we pray from our heart, God hears, just as He did the Syrophenician woman and the deaf man's friends. So to reinforce my message today, keep praying and be expectant. God loves us. He wants to hear from us and he wants to bless us.

Reading Text

Mark 7:24-37

²⁴ From there he set out and went away to the region of Tyre. He entered a house and did not want anyone to know he was there. Yet he could not escape notice, ²⁵ but a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit immediately heard about him, and she came and bowed down at his feet. ²⁶ Now the woman was a Gentile, of Syrophenician origin. She begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter. ²⁷ He 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.' ²⁸ But she answered him, 'Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs.' ²⁹ Then he said to her, 'For saying that, you may go—the demon has left your daughter.' ³⁰ So she went home, found the child lying on the bed, and the demon gone. ³¹ Then he returned from the region of Tyre, and went by way of Sidon towards the Sea of Galilee, in the region of the Decapolis. ³² They brought to him a deaf man who had an impediment in his speech; and they begged him to lay his hand on him. ³³ He took him aside in private, away from the crowd, and put his fingers into his ears, and he spat and touched his tongue. ³⁴ Then looking up to heaven, he sighed and said to him, 'Ephphatha', that is, 'Be opened.' ³⁵ And immediately his ears were opened, his tongue was released, and he spoke plainly. ³⁶ Then Jesus ordered them to tell no one; but the more he ordered them, the more zealously they proclaimed it. ³⁷ They were astounded beyond measure, saying, 'He has done everything well; he even makes the deaf to hear and the mute to speak.'