

Mark 7: 24-33

Jesus heals a Gentile woman's daughter after an interesting conversation, and opens the ears and mouth of a deaf-mute man. Jesus then tries to get the people to keep silent about what he has done, but they insist on spreading the news.

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, but a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit immediately heard about him, 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. 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." But she answered him, "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." Then he said to her, "For saying that, you may go - the demon has left your daughter." So she went home, found the child lying on the bed, and the demon gone.

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. They brought to him a deaf man who had an impediment in his speech; and they begged him to lay his hand on him. He took him aside in private, away from the crowd, and put his fingers into his ears, and he spat and touched his tongue. Then looking up to heaven, he sighed and said to him, "Ephphatha," that is, "Be opened." And immediately his ears were opened, his tongue was released, and he spoke plainly. Then Jesus ordered them to tell no one; but the more he ordered them, the more zealously they proclaimed it. They were astounded beyond measure, saying, "He has done everything well; he even makes the deaf to hear and the mute to speak."

COCU 55B Readings

In every reading this week God's preferential option for the poor and vulnerable is expressed. There is a clear and unequivocal call to justice as we follow Christ. In Proverbs, those who are just and generous are blessed, and God is seen to be on the side of the poor and oppressed, while resisting those who are unjust. Psalms celebrates God's care for God's people, and God's healing, restoration and blessing on the poor and broken, and on those who live generously and justly. In the letter of James, favouritism is denounced as breaking the law of love, and the people of faith are challenged to put their faith into action by caring for the poor. Finally, Jesus is shown to be our example for compassionate living, as he heals both a Gentile woman's daughter (after being challenged by her in his initial reluctance) and a Jewish man. The basic and consistent message of the Lectionary this week is this: Our faith is seen in how we treat others, especially in our love for, protection of and inclusion of the poor, the marginalised, the broken and the vulnerable. As such, favouritism, prejudice and discrimination are to be rejected, and inclusive love and welcome are to be embraced and practiced as the most basic and fundamental ingredients of our faith.

Our tendency to polarise ourselves has brought tremendous pain, conflict and brokenness to our world. Our divisions of rich and poor, men and women, believer and non-believer, gay and straight, western and eastern, white and black, powerful and weak, have done little to help us, but have left war, hunger, homelessness, and hatred in their wake.

This divisiveness has filtered through everything from theological and political discourse, to economic confrontation and even social activism. We need to recapture the radical inclusivity of the Gospel, following Jesus in his openness to serve and love even the rejected, marginalised and "unclean". We need to find a new Gospel-inspired collaboration across ideology, geography and economic status in order to address the great challenges facing us. And we need to allow the Church to become, once again, a welcome home for all who seek after God and God's ways, rather than an exclusive in-group trying to keep God for ourselves.

Prov 22: 1-2, 8-9, 22-23

A good reputation is of great value. God made both rich and poor, and those who are unjust will not survive, while those who are generous find happiness. God defends the poor and will stand against those who oppress them.

1A good name is to be chosen rather than great riches,
and favour is better than silver or gold.

2The rich and the poor have this in common:
the Lord is the maker of them all.

8Whoever sows injustice will reap calamity,
and the rod of anger will fail.

9Those who are generous are blessed,
for they share their bread with the poor.

22Do not rob the poor because they are poor,
or crush the afflicted at the gate;

23for the Lord pleads their cause
and despoils of life those who despoil them.

Psalms 125 *(A Psalm of Ascent that pilgrims sang on the way to Mt Zion)*

A prayer of confidence in God's care and protection of God's people, and a plea that God would do good to good people, but reject evil doers. God's people will endure if they trust in God. This is both a promise and a cause for praise as God's faithfulness is remembered. Mt Zion (and the temple) was the geographical centre of the Jewish identity, and came to represent the Davidic covenant and its Messianic promises for God's people. The psalmist uses Zion as a simile to say that God will be faithful to bring about God's covenant promises in and through those who trust in God.

Across the Kidron and Hinnom Valleys are immovable mountains that buffeted Jerusalem from attack. Those who trust God are also surrounded by God's protection. If God did not surround God's people, then evil would be in charge. The holy people of God, set apart so God could bring salvation to the nations, would cease to be God's people. The danger of evil leadership was internal and external. Time and again Hebrew kings had turned away to worship false gods. Ever since Egypt, a foreign pagan power sought control over the people and land God had promised.

Those who trust in the Lord are like Mount Zion,
which cannot be moved, but abides forever.
As the mountains surround Jerusalem,
so the Lord surrounds God's people,

from this time on and forevermore.

The sceptre of wickedness shall not rest on the land allotted to the righteous, so the righteous might not stretch out their hands to do wrong.

**Do good, O Lord, to those who are good,
and to those who are upright in their hearts.**

But those who turn aside to their own crooked ways
the Lord will lead away with evildoers.

Peace be upon Israel!

James 2: 1-10, 14-17

To show favouritism is to deny Jesus' faithfulness, and is to break the law which calls us to love our neighbours as ourselves. It is sinful to favour the wealthy over the poor. Claiming we have faith when we fail to live it out in acts of compassion is meaningless.

My brothers and sisters, do you with your acts of favouritism really believe in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ? For if a person with gold rings and in fine clothes comes into your assembly, and if a poor person in dirty clothes also comes in, and if you take notice of the one wearing the fine clothes and say, "Have a seat here, please," while to the one who is poor you say, "Stand there," or, "Sit at my feet," have you not made distinctions among yourselves, and become judges with evil thoughts? Listen, my beloved brothers and sisters. Has not God chosen the poor in the world to be rich in faith and to be heirs of the kingdom that he has promised to those who love him? But you have dishonoured the poor. Is it not the rich who oppress you? Is it not they who drag you into court? Is it not they who blaspheme the excellent name that was invoked over you?

You do well if you really fulfil the royal law according to the scripture, "You shall love your neighbour as yourself." But if you show partiality, you commit sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors. For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become accountable for all of it.

What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, "Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill," and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.