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# The FURROW

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Seán O'Sullivan

Restoring her  
Voice [II]:  
*The Syrophoenician  
Woman as an icon  
for enlarged  
thinking*

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# Restoring her Voice [II]: *The Syrophoenician Woman as an icon for enlarged thinking\**

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## THE ENDURING SIGNIFICANCE OF THE SYROPHOENICIAN WOMAN

When we are afforded time to hear and reflect on this unique and powerful gospel narrative, it highlights just how much we are missing out on when it is excluded from the Sunday Lectionary. Many of us, even those privileged to preach, simply never have to grapple with its unique testimony. I would dare to suggest that the majority of our communities have never heard this gospel proclaimed and that, even for priests and ministers, it constitutes little more than a vague memory from a scripture class many years ago. However, if we allow this text to speak its unique saving word to us it can I believe open us up to radically new insights in respect of our vision of Church and ministry. If we are willing to grapple with the text rather than ignoring it, if we are willing to listen to rather than to silence its message, it opens up the possibility of a new understanding and a new praxis.

## BECOMING AWARE OF OUR OWN UNCONSCIOUS BIAS

Modern psychology has helped us to understand the reality and the prevalence of unconscious bias. Unconscious biases are social stereotypes about certain groups of people that we carry outside of our own conscious awareness. Modern research demonstrate that unconscious biases affect not just some people but all people. They are part of the human condition and are shaped and influenced by our upbringing and formative experiences including but not limited to familial, cultural, societal, religious and ideological influences. Research has further demonstrated that unconscious bias is more prevalent than conscious prejudice and is very often incompatible

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Seán O’Sullivan is a priest of the diocese of Cork and Ross.  
Address: New Parochial House, Monkstown, Co. Cork.

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with one's conscious values. It is automatic, unintended and so deeply ingrained that it manifests itself almost as a reflexive response.

The historical, economic, cultural and religious tensions that existed between Jewish communities and Hellenistic communities in first century Palestine would have made for a potent mix in which unconscious biases between both communities would have thrived and flourished. Within such an understanding, Jesus' response to the woman's plea, incomprehensible though it may seem to traditional Christology and piety, is simply the natural manifestation of such an unconscious bias. Such an understanding by no means exonerates Jesus of the charges of discrimination and prejudice. Our unconscious biases do not comprise the totality of who we are nor do they absolve us of responsibility for the choices we make. But they are part of our human experience and a holistic doctrine of the incarnation must take account of the contemporary insights of psychology and the social sciences and recognise that being fully human involves constantly bringing our unconscious biases to consciousness as we seek to negotiate our sense of self-identity and establish our personal values. Indeed, one could argue that such a process is part of the human process of "growing in wisdom, stature, and in divine and human favour" acknowledged in Luke 2:52.

The encounter of Jesus and the Syrophenician woman and, in particular, Jesus' curt and offensive dismissal of the woman's plea for her sick daughter, confront us with the unsettling reality of unconscious bias. If the historical Jesus was not immune to such unconscious bias then, surely, we cannot expect to be. Therefore, the *first* challenge that Mark 7:24-31 sets before us is to recognise and critically examine our own unconscious biases, both individually as believers and collectively as a church, and to seek to overcome such bias in order to become authentic witnesses to the values we profess.

## AN AWARENESS OF THE POWER OF LANGUAGE

The encounter also alerts us to the way language and metaphor function as potent symbols of identity and differentiation and play a critical role in the articulation and perpetuation of bias and prejudice. Throughout history exclusionary practices have been underpinned by exclusionary language. We dehumanize the "other" in order to discriminate against them. The practice of exclusion and the language of exclusion go hand in hand. By differentiating Jew and Gentile as 'children' and 'little dogs' respectively, Jesus' response is in many senses already predetermined. Language is

not simply expressive of the act of exclusion but serves a strategic function in the propagation, justification, and perpetuation of attitudes of exclusion. The language we use continues to underwrite the practice of exclusion and so this passage warns us of the need to be constantly vigilant in the language and the imagery we use. It is surely legitimate, for example, to question how the Church's use of terms like 'disordered' in respect of homosexual acts and 'irregular unions' in respect of relationships outside of marriage are experienced by people within the gay and lesbian community and unmarried couples. What must it feel like to hear terms like 'disordered' or 'irregular' used in respect of the most significant and loving relationships in your life?

#### AN OPENNESS TO ENCOUNTER

T.S. Eliot famously wrote '*We had the experience but missed the meaning.*'<sup>1</sup> In many ways Mark 7:24-31 proclaims that without experience there can be no meaning; without encounter with the one who is different from ourselves there can be no transformation. It is in and through his encounter with the Syrophenician woman that Jesus discovers or, perhaps more truthfully, is forced to acknowledge, a new way of seeing himself, his ministry and the world. His encounter with the woman, being exposed to her perspective, her way of seeing things, leads him to new insights. These new insights, as we have seen, find expression in new inclusive practices in subsequent episodes. The historical encounter, fraught with the tensions and difficulties that typically characterize the meeting of those who differ from each other, births a new understanding which expresses itself in a renewed personal practice that later becomes normative for his disciples and the Christian community when he commands them in Mark 13:10 to proclaim the good news to all nations. Encounter leads to a reinterpreted self-understanding which in turn leads to a new praxis. Experience and perception shape and ultimately transform each other.

This passage proclaims that personal encounter with those who think differently from us, including those who oppose our vision and criticize our understanding, is essential if we are to grow in understanding and refine our own vision of faith and ministry. If we content ourselves, as we often do, to discuss matters with like-minded groups and individuals, we condemn ourselves to what John O'Donohue has poetically called '*the blindness of one-sided certainty*'. Unless we are willing to engage with the perspective of the 'other', unless we are willing to try to see things from their

1 T. S. Eliot, *The Dry Salvages* (no. 3 of Four Quartets, Stanza I).

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perspective, we will have our truth, our way of seeing and they will have theirs but there will be and can be no shared truth among us and so we deny ourselves the possibility of mutual transformation and enlarged thinking revealed in Jesus' encounter with the Syrophoenician woman.

Any such option for encounter rather than isolation will only be fruitful however if it is marked by a deep and sincere humility that recognizes that God, the world and life itself are infinitely larger than we can ever know or imagine. The scriptures themselves recognize not only the partiality of our knowledge and understanding, but the partiality of even the possibilities of knowledge and understanding. Second Isaiah [Isaiah 45:8-9] declares that 'my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the LORD. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.' Romans 11:34 asks what is surely intended as a rhetorical question: 'Who has known the mind of the LORD?' The humble recognition that new worlds of meaning and understanding exist beyond the limits of our experience and knowledge is a necessary precondition for any fruitful encounter. When Jesus is confronted with the contrasting perspective and distinctive cultural lens of the Syrophoenician woman, he is challenged to acknowledge the *partiality* of his own response. This passage challenges us not only to accept that there are other lenses through which to see the world, but also and perhaps more importantly, to accept that these contrasting lenses are as equally valid as ours and, in many instances, are in fact the only ones through which a different contextual reality can be seen or understood. By being open to the perspective of the other we take a giant step towards enlarged thinking and thereby towards transformative encounter.

Drawing on perspectives from Hannah Arendt, Miroslav Volf urges that even when we are convinced our programme is correct we must do so with the realization that our perspective is partial and limited, that there is always more than we can see. We must be always ready to expand our thinking and even our moral convictions. We enlarge our thinking by:

... letting the voices and perspectives of others, especially those with whom we may be in conflict, resonate within ourselves, by allowing them to help us see them, as well as ourselves, from their perspective, and if needed, readjust our perspectives as we take into account their perspectives. ... Reversing perspectives may lead us not only to learn something from the other, but also to look afresh at our own traditions and rediscover their neglected or even forgotten resources. ... We see what we have

not seen before because, in the encounter with the other, we have made space within ourselves not only for the perspective of the other but with the help of the other also for silenced voices within our own tradition.<sup>2</sup>

Our praxis of encounter must involve therefore a willingness to re-examine our own views and convictions in much the same way as Jesus was forced to reassess his own position by the Syrophenician woman's response. The experience of the 'other' and their 'contrasting truth' can often become a mirror that serves to expose anti-gospel values and attitudes in our understanding that we are simply unaware of.

#### A SAVING WORD FROM THE OUTSIDE

This unique passage also challenges us to be open to the fact that the 'messianic' or 'saving' word can be, and often is, spoken by the very people we as Church seek to oppose or exclude. The evidence of the scriptural text is clear. Jesus explicitly acknowledges the woman's word or 'logos' as the saving word of the encounter. It is the Syrophenician woman, the very one whom Jesus has sought to exclude, who speaks the messianic word within the pericope: Jesus merely announces the miracle but significantly he attributes it explicitly to her 'logos,' her word. The woman's response, her insistence on the legitimacy of her plea, her refusal to be excluded: these constitute the defining wisdom of the story. It is she who is the catalyst for the move from exclusion to embrace. Through a dialogue that dared to reach across the divide of 'difference,' the situation of both sides is transformed and enriched: her daughter is healed of the unclean spirit and Jesus is cleansed of the equally unclean spirit of prejudice and exclusion. In a telling comment on this passage Perkinson insists that, viewed in such a light, the pericope "can be read as a moment, when in its very genesis, christology offers us a detail that questions its own powers of normativity as discourse. ... It constitutes a site where the canonical source of christology can be read against itself as a totalizing authority."<sup>3</sup>

Mark 7:24-31 therefore calls us then to be less arrogant about our own understanding, our own theology, our own tradition and to be *open* to what God may be revealing in and through those who we all too often regard as opponents, critics and outsiders. The text clearly records Jesus changing his mind. He is willing to admit

2 Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness and Reconciliation* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1996), 213.

3 Jim Perkinson, "A Canaanite Word in the Logos of Christ or the difference the Syrophenician Woman makes to Jesus," *Semeia 75* (1996) 69.

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the inadequacy of his initial position and to enlarge his thinking by making room within himself for the perspective of the woman. He is open to recognizing the contradictions between his initial refusal to answer the woman's plea and his own sense of himself as an instrument of God's mercy. In so doing he recognizes that he himself needs to change if he is to become the authentic witness to God's mercy that he believes himself to be. That example should challenge us as a *Church* to be constantly open to critically examining the adequacy and the coherence of our theology, our teaching and our pastoral praxis when confronted with new insights and perspectives. All too often Church tradition and Church teaching are conferred with, or indeed claim for themselves, what Perkinson terms a 'totalizing authority.' The scriptural witness of Mark 7:24-31 challenges any such claim to 'a totalizing authority.' If Jesus, the incarnate Son of God, the fulness of God's revelation, needed to enlarge his thinking then, surely, we as a Church must be willing to do likewise. Therefore, in seeking to speak to our world we must demonstrate both *modesty* and *courage*. If we lack modesty, we are likely to repeat the mistake of Job's friends who preferred their own comfortable understanding of God more than the God who said that only Job had spoken correctly about him (Job 42:7). If we lack courage, we will have nothing to say to our world, nothing to offer it. In seeking to speak to our world we must respect both the freedom and the mystery of God attested to within the scriptures, as in Isaiah 48:6-7: 'From this time forward I make you hear new things, hidden things that you have not known. They are created now, not long ago; before today you have never heard of them, so that you could not say, "I already knew them."' If we fail to respect this radical and intrinsic freedom of God, we make God small, and God is never small! We need to be ever mindful of the call to modesty for all theological discourse laid down by the Cuban philosopher Raúl Fornet Betancourt when he reminds us that '*No one can speak absolutely of the Absolute!*'

## A CHURCH DE-CENTERED BY MERCY

In the gospel encounter we have seen that the woman's faith in the unbiased and unconditional nature of *mercy* stands as the inspiration of her response and is the "contrasting truth" with which she confronts Jesus, inspiring him to refine his understanding of himself and his mission. Mercy has been described by Pope Francis in recent years as 'God's most powerful word' and, as such, should be understood as the fundamental principle of the activity of God and ought to stand at the heart of our vision of faith and Church.

It must transcend our different theologies and pastoral approaches and stand at the very heart of our self-understanding.

Sadly, for many people, this is *not* their experience of Church. Like the Syrophoenician woman, many people experience rejection rather than welcome; exclusion rather than embrace; judgment rather than acceptance; and condemnation in place of the compassion for which they so desperately yearn. All too often we allow our theologies, our tradition and our teaching to take precedence and we push mercy to the margins, satisfying ourselves with mere acts of mercy rather than making mercy itself the fundamental and guiding principle of the Church's life. The Syrophoenician woman dramatically reminds us that the core value of mercy must stand at the very heart and center of our Christian vision. We must be willing, where necessary, to be 'de-centered' by mercy by placing the demands of mercy above and beyond all other considerations, even the wellbeing of the Church itself. If we truly believe that mercy is God's most powerful word, then it must also become our *defining* wisdom by which all other aspects of our belief and praxis are evaluated and critiqued.

Like the Syrophoenician woman, many people continue to be drawn to Jesus and the grace he promises, only to be rebuffed because of their gender, their sexuality, their politics, their theology, their lifestyle or their life circumstances. These include but are not limited to women of faith who seek a path to ordained ministry and/or an authentic and real leadership role in the Church; people of deep faith and devotion who find themselves excluded from full Eucharistic Communion because they have dared to seek happiness and security in new relationships; members of the LGBT community who ardently desire to be part of the grace that Christ has promised and emerging theological voices who seek to articulate new understandings of faith by giving voice to communities who traditionally been not been part of our theology. Yet, like the Syrophoenician woman before them, many people who reach out to the church in hope and expectation experience instead rejection and exclusion. Thankfully, like the Syrophoenician woman, many of these voices refuse to be silenced and refuse to accept that no more can be said on the matter. Following the example of the Syrophoenician woman they courageously *challenge* the legitimacy of their exclusion by appealing to the fundamental principle of God's mercy and God's unconditional love. The question we must ask ourselves is whether we, as a Church, are capable of hearing their 'contrasting truth' and are willing to follow the example of Jesus in allowing their perspective, their way of seeing the same reality, to enlarge our thinking and, if necessary, to reshape our understanding and our pastoral practice.



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### AN ICON FOR ENLARGED THINKING

*Change* is never easy, even at a personal level. Accepting that our point of view or understanding is inadequate to the reality and circumstances we now face is deeply challenging, even at a personal level. That challenge is magnified when it comes to an institution as large and as diverse as the Church, particularly one with such a long history and such an extensive tradition. But tradition need not weigh us down.

*Tradition doesn't have to weigh us down.  
We weigh ourselves down with tradition,  
with the past, with past failures, past forms, past perceptions.  
We have made these things. We can unmake them ...  
New worlds wait to be created  
by free minds that can dream unfettered,  
without fear, turning obstacles  
into milestones towards luminous glories.<sup>4</sup>*

In seeking to address the reality of difference within our Church and amongst those who seek a place within our Church, we must account for the biblical witness of the Syrophenician woman in Mark 7:24-31. The undeniable fact is that the earliest of the four canonical gospels deliberately includes a controversial and polemical passage that unambiguously shows Jesus changing his mind and enlarging his thinking when confronted with the contrasting perspective of a Syrophenician woman. Her perspective forces him to critically re-examine his own tradition and self-understanding and to ask himself whether his rejection of her plea for her sick daughter can be reconciled with his own understanding of himself as the instrument of God's mercy. As a Church we cannot shirk the challenge of this polemical passage. We cannot turn a blind eye to the testimony of scripture *just because* it is unsettling and challenges our traditional way of thinking. Neither can we turn a deaf ear to the 'Syrophenicians' of our own time.

And yet it seems to me that within the Church there remains a strong and steadfast *resistance* to enlarging our thinking. Often the Church's preferred way of dealing with difference seems to consist in simply denying the legitimacy of any view that is not in accordance with tradition and official Church teaching. The Summary of the Findings of the Apostolic Visitation in Ireland, published on the 20<sup>th</sup> March 2012, for example appear to reflect such a mindset. It stated that '... Since the Visitation also encountered a certain tendency, not dominant but nevertheless fairly widespread

4 Ben Okri, *Mental Fight* (London: Phoenix House, 1999), 13.

among priests, religious and laity, to hold theological opinions at variance with the teachings of the Magisterium, this serious situation requires particular attention, directed principally towards improved theological formation. It must be stressed that dissent from the fundamental teachings of the Church is not the authentic path towards renewal.’ Two weeks after this particular statement, during his homily in Saint Peter’s Basilica on Holy Thursday, Pope Benedict criticised Austrian priests who had publicly supported the ordination of women and the abolition of priestly celibacy, describing such ‘disobedience’ as a ‘disregarding of the definitive decisions of the Church’s Magisterium, such as the question of women’s ordination, for which Blessed Pope John Paul II stated irrevocably that the Church has received no authority from the Lord.’ Whilst acknowledging that such calls for reform might be well-intentioned and motivated by concern for the Church, Pope Benedict insisted that true renewal was to be found in a “radicalism of obedience.” The choice of *language* is significant and revealing. Terms such as ‘definitive decisions,’ ‘irrevocably stated’ and ‘obedience’ seem to reject *a priori* the legitimacy or merit or any viewpoint that differs from or diverges from the ‘official position’ and therefore shuts down debate and any possibility of enlarged thinking. Vatican II however insisted that the sacred scriptures are the soul of sacred theology and the scriptural witness of Mark 7:24-31 clearly shows Jesus changing his mind, enlarging his thinking, refining his vision of himself and his ministry, even though this meant rejecting a position he had previously held as being no longer adequate.

The voice of the Syrophenician woman refuses to be silenced today just as she refused to be silenced in her encounter with Christ. She stands as an enduring icon for *enlarged thinking*, calling us to a radical openness to new perspectives, a willingness to critically re-examine our understanding in light of these new and emerging perspectives and a readiness to enlarge our thinking if and when these new perspectives expose inadequacies or contradictions within our way of understanding God, faith and the world. She challenges us to multiply our perspectives in order to broaden our vision. She invites us to remove the ‘blinkers’ that limit our vision and understanding and to be willing to see familiar realities from new perspectives by opening ourselves up to the experiences and perspective of those who differ from us. She teaches us not to be threatened by difference but rather to seek unity in diversity, building on the firm foundation of the mercy of God which overcomes all boundaries. She warns us that, in seeking to silence what we regard as dissenting voices, we may in fact be silencing God’s ‘saving word’ and denying ourselves the opportunity to

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grow in our understanding of the mystery of God. She calls on us to be less arrogant, less certain, and less dogmatic in our teachings and in our understanding.

God remains free to act and to speak in and through whom God chooses and we must learn to respect that freedom. In Mark 7:24-31 the saving word is clearly spoken by the Syrophoenician woman and is acknowledged as such by Jesus. Hers is the transforming power of the story. And yet that saving and transforming word is effectively silenced by the Church by its deliberate omission from Sunday worship. This passage is one of the few passages in Mark's Gospel not included in the Sunday Lectionary. Is that because the Church does not want to be disturbed by its radical revelation just as Jesus did not want to be disturbed at the beginning of the passage? Yet it is precisely by being disturbed that Jesus grows in his understanding of his own self and his mission. The Syrophoenician woman refuses to be silenced now just as once she refused to be silenced in the region of Tyre. Her insistence on the primacy of mercy continues to challenge the illusion of legitimacy of every form of exclusion and to champion the dignity of difference. She remains an inspiring icon for enlarged thinking and continues to speak her saving word. The question is: Will the Church afford us the opportunity to hear that saving word? If not, why not?

**A universal event.** The Church embraces all of humanity for the simple reason that the founder of the Church, Jesus Christ, died for all. In recent times, the Church has understood more clearly its call to be an instrument of unity in the world – contributing to bringing about unity with God and the unity of the human race.

- BISHOP BRENDAN LEAHY, Catholic Perspectives on Inter-religious Dialogue in *Connecting Lives*, ed. Patricia Kieran (Dublin: Veritas) p. 121.