

**Sermon: Christ Church South Yarra, 6/09/09**  
**10am Choral Eucharist and Holy Baptism**

*James 2:1-17, Mark 7:24-37.*

**Bidding:**      Come, O God,  
                    Touch our ears, that they may be opened to hear your words of Life.  
                    Touch our mouths that they may be opened to declare your glory.  
                    Touch our lives, that they may be open to the needs of others.  
                    Through Christ, Amen.

The story of the Syrophonecian woman has elements which grate very harshly in our modern ears. Jesus's initial response to the woman's request sounds, from our perspective, both un-PC, and, frankly, un-pastoral. However, we must remember that the original audience would have heard these words with very different cultural perceptions, and that the Markan author is not writing to provide a strict historic account, but to teach and preach the good news of salvation through narrative.

The narrative here is a deeply powerful image. A woman, at her wit's end in seeking help for her afflicted daughter, courageously launches into the public arena in a manner breaking numerous social taboos, and implores Jesus to restore her daughter to a fullness of Humanity.

Her courage is intense: not only is a situation where a woman is speaking out in a public arena, it's also a Gentile woman speaking to a Jewish male. Her desperation has led her to ignore social conventions relating to male-female, and Jew-Gentile interaction

Yet, the woman's courage comes not only from desperation. Indeed, she acts with great confidence, because her Faith gives her strength - at least for this moment. Perceiving that Christ's preaching speaks of a gift of Grace offered universally, she responds to Jesus' message of salvation with utter conviction and Trust, placing all of her Hope upon the promise of God's restorative Justice.

Trusting in this Hope, she stands before Jesus reminding him of his role as the bringer of Justice and Mercy for all people. She seeks out God's fullness of Grace to be her own, claiming for her family a small morsel of the inheritance promised to the children of God.

In the same way, at Baptism we each stand as a Syrophonecian woman, trusting in Jesus' action of restoration and fulfilment of Humanity, and implore God for Grace.

Individually, at our own Baptism, we each stepped forward in Faith, imploring God's Grace for the renewal of our lives, and claiming a new identity as Children of God.

Communally, at each parish Baptism, we all stand together as a family, asking in Faith that God's grace may fall upon those whom we shall receive as fellow children of God.

Presently, at today's Baptism, Paige will step forward in Faith with us, seeking out God's Grace for the enrichment and renewal of her own life, and for the lives of her family. Spencer and Verity likewise step forward in Faith, calling upon God to enrich and enliven the life of their family, and of our family.

And we shall receive them in Faith, claiming them 'as children of the one heavenly father, and as an inheritor with us of the kingdom of God.'

As many of us will willingly attest, Baptism is not the only step to be taken in Faith. In Baptism we each begin the first portion of a lifelong journey of Faith, marked out in courageous, socially transgressive steps of all different types, made throughout the rest of our lives.

Living out our Baptismal Faith is a lifelong process of stepping forward bravely, trusting in the Hope we have of God's restorative justice. As this morning's first hymn reminds us, it's not always easy. God's call to live justly, love mercy and walk humbly is indeed a command both 'hard and high'.

There are many times when the courage to stand by our Faith weakens: particularly when this means transgressing social norms. Sometimes, instead of stepping forward bravely, we stumble, or seek to turn aside.

Yet, each day of our lives we are called to live as Syrophonecian women, finding the confidence to step forward in Jesus' message of love and salvation: in God's embrace of every aspect of our Humanity.

This is, in many ways, also the message of today's passage from James. 'Faith, without works, is dead' In Chapter two of his epistle, James argues that the life of Faith is something which simply CANNOT be passive, for the life of the Faithful is a life of ENACTED hope. We know that fullness of life is to be found in our Faith, and therefore, we are compelled to live out the ramifications of that Faith: to act in ways which bring about the fullness of God's Grace in the world.

For James, extending God's Grace into the world is not a matter of 'Saving Souls'. The action of the community of the Baptised is not just about preaching Christ crucified, but also about extending God's just and equitable action to all Humanity, both rich and poor, social outcast and social butterfly. In today's second reading we are reminded that, as people who have found our fullness of Humanity in the embrace of Christ, we are called to embrace the full Humanity of others, to promote justice, equity, and respect for all people.

For James this means promoting respect and equity for the needy and for the satisfied, for the rich and the poor, for the desirable and the undesirable, and dare I add, also for the homebound, the homeless, the migrant, the indigenious, the oppressed, the oppressor, for man, woman and child, for all people: both the lovable and the unlovely?

Stepping out in Faith to seek Grace for ourselves and for others involves defying social conventions: being the voice of Love and Truth in Love-less situations.

And in this we are foreshadowed by the Syrophonecian woman again; for in transgressively seeking out the Christ in Faith, she asked not Grace for herself, but rather for the restoration of dignity and fullness of Humanity and wellbeing for another: one who shared her own flesh and blood.

May our Baptismal Faith help us to have the courage to continue to act in ways seeking to restore equality, respect and dignity to all people, to bring in ourselves the Grace of God to all those who share with us in all the fragile flesh and blood of our Humanity.

As the Syrophonecian woman so boldly reminded Jesus: a place in the inheritance of the children of God is a gift of Grace which has been offered to all.

In this inheritance of Grace is our Hope, our Life, and our Responsibility.

Amen.

Thomas Leslie