

“This strange Jesus...” Mark 7:24-37

And from there he arose and went away to the region of Tyre and Sidon. And he entered a house and did not want anyone to know, yet he could not be hidden. But immediately a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit heard of him and came and fell down at his feet. Now the woman was a Gentile, a Syrophenician by birth. And she begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter. And he said to her, “Let the children be fed first, for it is not right to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs.” But she answered him, “Yes, Lord; yet even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs.” And he said to her, “For this statement you may go your way; the demon has left your daughter.” And she went home and found the child lying in bed and the demon gone. Then he returned from the region of Tyre and went through Sidon to the Sea of Galilee, in the region of the Decapolis. And they brought to him a man who was deaf and had a speech impediment, and they begged him to lay his hand on him. And taking him aside from the crowd privately, he put his fingers into his ears, and after spitting touched his tongue. And looking up to heaven, he sighed and said to him, “Ephphatha,” that is, “Be opened.” And his ears were opened, his tongue was released, and he spoke plainly. And Jesus charged them to tell no one. But the more he charged them, the more zealously they proclaimed it. And they were astonished beyond measure, saying, “He has done all things well. He even makes the deaf hear and the mute speak.”

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ! Today's Gospel reading, what do you think of it? It is not an easy one to understand. Would you agree? Quite a few things are rather puzzling. What was Jesus doing in the region of Tyre and Sidon?

Why didn't He want anyone to know that He was there? How did this woman, from that land of false gods, know who Jesus was? What to make of how Jesus responded to her request? That was awkward...

Why did Jesus charge those people not to tell anyone about the miraculous healing that He had just performed? You see... many puzzles, many questions. So many confusing details in just a few verses!

And the truth is, we cannot answer most of these questions. No one can. Because there is no explanation given to us. How does this make you feel? What should we do when we cannot understand what the Bible tells us?

Then we should ask another question – what does this text do to us? What does this text and many other texts in the Bible, which are not easy to understand, do to us? What impact do they have on us? How do they influence us? For one, and this is very important, even if it is not that pleasant, such difficult texts remind us of who we are. The Triune God is God... and we are not.

We are His little creatures, loved beyond our comprehension, but still so limited and foolish and in need to learn and grow in our understanding. But think about this - why do we often feel discomfort when we cannot understand what is going on, when

we cannot understand what the text is telling us? The thing is - if we can understand and explain something, we in a way feel that we are in control. That we have conquered that territory, that topic, that person.

And even we as Christians have the desire to somehow put our God in a box. We would like to exercise control over Him at least with our minds. To tame Him. To make Him understandable. To make Him predictable. To make Him manageable.

But we cannot. There is no subduing this God. There is no taming Him. There is no putting Him in a box. There is no grasping Him fully with our feeble minds. He does what He does in a way He chooses; He doesn't ask for our permission and often He doesn't provide explanations.

For He is God, and we are not. This is one thing that we are reminded when we read about what Jesus did, and when we struggle to make sense of it. He is not accountable to us. He is not even comprehensible to us. He is the Eternal One, the Almighty One, the Infinite One. He is in control and we are not.

The second thing that accounts like this do to and for us is – they invite us, they drive us deeper into the Scriptures, and closer to the Author of the Scriptures. Yes! If something is not immediately clear, it makes us search the Scriptures even more diligently and to listen to our God even more attentively.

And as we do, good things happen – the Holy Spirit brings us closer and closer to Jesus. You see, we should rejoice when we encounter accounts in the Bible that we cannot immediately understand, for they are good for us. They help us to remain humble as we listen to God speaking to us in the words of Scripture, and they help us to grow closer to our God as we wrestle to understand His message.

Okay, you may say, but then what are the things that this passage can help us to understand? **Let's reflect on two of them today. First, let's learn something about Jesus and, second, let's learn something about how to find Him.**

First, what can we learn about Jesus? That He goes to strange places and does things we cannot understand. Why would He be hiding? And also, that He says things that don't make much sense to us. The way He spoke to the Syrophoenician woman, for example. As if we wanted to drive her away...

How do you picture His conversation with this woman? What was Jesus' tone? What was His body language? What were His intentions? I think that as we read this account we all try to paint a picture of that event in our minds, don't we?

But the reality is, we don't have enough information. We can only fill the gaps according to our own ideas. And ours may not be the best judgment. Indeed, we do not know why Jesus went there. Maybe He was exhausted. Wanted a week off.

We don't know how Jesus spoke with this woman either. Was He angry because He was recognized? Was He disappointed that He could not get rest? Maybe He was concerned that it was not the right time yet for the Son of God to be revealed to the Gentiles? Maybe He wanted to test this woman's faith, to see whether she came motivated by some superstition, or did she truly know who Jesus was? We just don't know. But what we do know is what happened after.

The surprising thing is that the woman indeed knew who Jesus was. She had a genuine, beautiful Christian faith. She knew Him as her gracious and merciful Saviour, who had come to bring the healing and restoration not only to Israel, but to all nations, to all people, also to her and her daughter.

Obviously, she had heard about Jesus. The Holy Spirit had enlightened her, and she trusted that Jesus is the One who brings the Kingdom of God and defeats the powers of evil and chaos. Her humility before Jesus, her trust in Him was richly rewarded as Jesus said the words that she so longed to hear:

“For this statement you may go your way; the demon has left your daughter.” And she went home and found the child lying in bed and the demon gone.” We cannot understand everything that our God does, we cannot put Him in a box.

But we can be assured that in Jesus we have a gracious and merciful God. In Jesus we have God, who understands our struggles and our pain. We have God who has come to share our flesh and our fate. We have God, who hears our prayers, who is compassionate and caring.

When the world, the flesh and the devil attack us, we know that in Jesus we have God, whose heart belongs to us, and whose faithfulness to us won't be shaken. This is what we can know for sure. That's a lot. You have God, who understands you, hears you and walks with you exactly where you are. What more can someone wish for...

The second thing we can learn is about how one can find Jesus. A few weeks ago, we had this reading from John 6, where Jesus repeatedly stated that no one, NO ONE! can come to Him, unless the Father draws them.

And in today's reading we can see that if the Father draws someone, they will most certainly find Jesus. Jesus had travelled to the region where no one expected Him to be. He even wanted to hide. But the Syrophenician woman still found Him.

The Spirit had revealed her who Jesus was, the Father had drawn her, and she came to Jesus. But there is something else in those events which we read about, which seems quite contra-intuition. It seems that sometimes Jesus deliberately makes it harder for people to find it. What do I mean?

We already reflected on how unusual his engagement with the Syrophenician woman was. And what about the deaf and mute man whom He healed? And then He charged them not to tell anyone about what He has done. Why?

Can you think of a better advertisement for Jesus' cause? For the Church's cause?! Jesus can heal! Our God can heal! Anyone! He can feed! All of us! Perhaps, He can give us what we want! Why did not Jesus use this to attract more people?

Jesus knew it too well, that these things will attract people. And they did and do even today. But attracted by healing or feeding people came to Jesus for wrong reasons. Those may be people who are drawn not by God the Father, but by their desire for all the healings and feedings.

Jesus' goal was not to gather as many people as possible, by giving them what they wanted and thus making them His followers, hoping that then maybe one day they will recognize who He truly is, and what He has come to bring us.

Jesus charged not to tell anyone about His miracles, for He wanted to gather around Him people whom the Father has drawn to Him, people who would come for the right reasons. People, who would come to Him knowing who He is, the Son of God, true God and true man.

Who would know why Jesus has come. Not to feed or heal us, even as in His grace He often does it as well, but ultimately - to rescue us from our greatest enemies, from sin, death and devil. People, who would know what Jesus has brought us. The medicine of eternal life. The forgiveness of all our sins. The salvation and life.

The resurrection of the body and new life with Jesus in the Kingdom of God. It is not that hard to gather people. Christians are often tempted to do just that. Give them what they want, find ways to please them and they will come. But... offer them what the Triune God wants for them – and only a chosen few will respond.

As Jesus said in the sermon on the Mount. **“For the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few.”**

Do you see how this brings us great joy and comfort? You are here! How? It means that the Father Himself has drawn you. Yes, that He has given you His Spirit as a guarantee of the inheritance which you will receive in His Kingdom.

It means that you are His own, belonging to God, redeemed and rescued, and as Jesus said, no one is able to snatch you out of the Father's hand. And as Paul said, no one and nothing will be ever able to separate you from the love of God in Jesus Christ. This is the source of our joy!

It also means that we don't need to try to attract anyone to come to Jesus by pleasing them. To draw them to Jesus, that is the Father's job. We are simply to share the Good News about Jesus as faithfully and winsomely as we can, pray for those people and let the Holy Spirit do His job. We can't make anyone a Christian by our efforts.

We can and we should walk with people, we should care for them and tell them what God has done for them in Jesus – that their sins can be forgiven, their captivity to evil powers broken, true freedom and eternal life given and relationships with God the Father restored - and then let the Holy Spirit do the rest. And we can be assured that God's Word will accomplish what it is sent to do.

This much for today. Remember, every bit of the Sacred Scripture is given to us to bring us God's blessings, to draw us closer to Jesus so that we can have more wisdom and understanding, more joy and more peace and more assurance that one day our God will bring us where He wants us to be.

That is, with Him. In His near presence. Forever. In New Heavens and New Earth “to live under Him in His kingdom and serve Him in everlasting righteousness, innocence, and blessedness.” Remember, Jesus has already gone to prepare a place for you. And what a place it will be! What a place! Amen.