

What we hear depends on what we know. Mark’s first readers knew the social, economic, political and religious backdrop of these stories (Mark 7:24-37). Without knowing this backstory, we will be like the deaf man who can scarcely speak.

There was bad blood between the people of Tyre (Tyrians) and the people of Galilee (Galileans), partly because much of the agricultural produce of Jewish Galilee ended up in Gentile Tyre, the main urban center near Galilee.

When Jesus speaks about the unfairness of taking bread out of the mouths of the children (Jews) and giving it to the dogs (Gentiles), his statement may partly reflect the socio-economic tensions between the two communities. Jewish children, children of peasant farmers, often went hungry while Gentile children, children of the city merchants, were well fed.

Moreover, Mark is writing in the midst of the Jewish War (66-73 CE). The war originated in Greek and Jewish religious tensions, and later escalated due to anti-taxation protests and attacks upon Roman citizens. Josephus reports that the Tyrians were among the Jews bitterest enemies and cites pogroms going back to the first century B.C.E.

During the Jewish War, Tyrian Gentiles killed a considerable number of their Jewish neighbors and imprisoned many in chains. This poisonous atmosphere may well have infected the fledgling Christian church in Tyre, the majority of whose members were probably Gentiles.

The New Testament authors, including Mark, did not think they were writing timeless philosophical treatises or works of art but targeted messages. Mark’s purpose in writing is similar to that articulated by George Orwell:

*My starting point is always a feeling of partisanship, a sense of injustice. When I sit down to write a book, I do not say to myself, “I am going to produce a work of art.” I write it because there is some lie that I want to expose, some fact to which I want to draw attention, and my initial concern is to get a hearing.*

Mark, too, begins with a feeling of partisanship, a concern to get a hearing, a desire to expose lies and to draw attention to “facts.” And just as we would never understand Orwell’s fable *Animal Farm* without some comprehension of early Soviet history, so we will never understand Mark if we do not try to enter imaginatively into his first-century world.

The NRSV translation identifies the woman who comes to Jesus seeking help for her daughter as a “Gentile”. The word translated “Gentile” is literally “Greek.” This may mean she is a Greek-speaker and thus perhaps a member of the upper crust of Phoenician society and wealthy like the woman described in Mark 5 whose daughter is at death’s door.

Jesus is in hiding; he wants to be alone. A woman who is likely wealthy and privileged, who at the time of Mark’s writing represents the murderous enemy in the Jewish War, whose daughter is possessed by an unclean spirit, interrupts Jesus’ sabbatical.

Jesus initial response to her exhibits an unusual sensitivity to his Jewish countrymen’s claims to salvation-history privilege and is unusually rude about the position of Gentiles: the Jews are God’s children, and their needs come first; compared to them, non-Jews are “dogs.”

At the time of writing, Mark may feel that the Christian communities in the region of Tyre, where Gentile animosity against Jews runs high, need to be sharply reminded of God’s continuing favor for his ancient people. Theology is always shouting into the wind, and in Tyre the wind may be blowing in an anti-Jewish direction; the Christians in Tyre, therefore, may need to hear a clear message about the Jewish “first.”

Paul echoes this concern when he reminds Gentile Christians that they are branches grafted onto an olive tree. The roots of the tree are Jewish; there is no room for Gentile arrogance.

Karl Barth and Dietrich Bonhoeffer shouted the same reminder into the wind sweeping through the German Christian Church in the 1930’s. Barth was fired from the University of Bonn and exiled from Germany; Bonhoeffer was hung in a concentration camp.

There is no doubt, however, that from Mark’s perspective the future of the Christian movement lies largely in the Gentile world. The Greek woman is the only person in the Gospels to win an argument with Jesus.

The woman’s response transforms the dog of Jesus’ metaphor, which is presumably a street dog that lives outside the house, into a domestic dog that resides inside the house. The dog, therefore, though admittedly in a position inferior to children, is still part of the “household of faith.”

The next part of our text for today illustrates how hard it is to hear cries of injustice and how our advocacy for the marginalized is at best stammering speech. Matthew and Luke have omitted the magical elements of Mark’s version of this story. If we get tripped up by them, we will fail to hear what Mark is saying.

Tyre and Sidon are in Lebanon. Isaiah mentions Lebanon in the context of a divine cure for deafness. Gentiles are associated with deafness in several passages from OT prophets because of their presumed insensitivity to God's word. We may read this story as a metaphorical allusion to prophecies in Isaiah, which it would imply, are now being fulfilled.

*Then will the eyes of the blind be opened, and the ears of the deaf hear . . . and the tongue of the speech-impaired will be clear (Isa 35:5-6). And on that day the deaf will hear the words of the book (Isa 29:18). And the hearts of the feeble will pay attention so that they may hear, and the tongues of the inarticulate will quickly learn to speak (Isa 32:4).* It seems likely the original audience of this miracle story was expected to perceive the allusions to Isaiah.

The breaking of the bonds of the man's tongue is analogous to breaking the bonds of captives. The opened ear is used as a symbol of revelation. Mark's audience has been deaf to God's word, but Jesus opens their ears to hear the old, old story of God's glory, and freed their tongues to tell of God's love.

Is there anything more difficult to hear than our privileges and prejudices called into question? Is there anything more challenging to find than words that break the bonds of those held captive by our privileges and prejudices?