

Mark 7:24-37

The color green has a paradoxical meaning as a liturgical color. It represents life & growth, and in our chancel paraments stands for Jesus himself. As Christ teaches us in John 10:

As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. I am the vine; you are the branches.

But even as this passage shows, the eventual purpose for which Christ came to abide among us was to abide within us. The end of his days as a man among us – his death on the cross, his breaking forth from the tomb, and after forty days his ascent in glory to God’s right hand – marked also the beginning of Christ within us through the working of the Holy Spirit, making us members of his body. And so the color green reminds us all summer long and through November that, without Christ alive and at work in the world today, there is no Church. This congregation does not exist, and you and I are not Christians with the hope of the Gospel, save for the fact that ever since Pentecost Jesus himself has continued his mission of rescuing mankind through the mission and ministry of his Body, the Church.

This is why, when we read episodes from the Gospels, they serve both as the record of Jesus’ earthly ministry, and as the pattern for us to follow in our common mission. By meditating on how he fulfilled his unique mission to redeem & reconcile the world by atoning for our sins, we learn all that our mission entails as we proclaim to the world what he has accomplished.

So now, let’s turn to today’s Gospel from Mark 7. Right away we see that it is easy to divide the reading into two halves: First, we have the conversation between Jesus and the Syro-Phoenician, who speaks Greek and lives in the region of Tyre & Sidon; along with how this conversation leads to the healing of her daughter. In the second half, the scene changes to the Decapolis (the ten-town region southeast of the Sea of Galilee), where Christ restores a disabled man to full ability to speak and to hear. BUT WAIT: while it may be easy to divide the account this way, we run the danger of overlooking one other point of great significance.

Permit me to ask you this: How many of you have had a job that allows you a specific number of vacation days? Who among us has not enjoyed that moment of leaving work, packing up, and getting away as fast, perhaps as far, and definitely for as long as you can? Yes, vacations often come to us as one of life’s most pleasant refreshments – far from being mere luxuries, they can sometimes be positively vital to our well-being. Just ask anyone who has seen his well-earned and long-sought vacation period cut short or even canceled by the sudden call of duty.

Did Christ Jesus ever take a vacation? Did he need one? Of the four Gospel-writers, Mark is known among scholars for giving us small but clear glimpses into the human frailty of our Lord, the

physical and emotional pressure and wear inflicted on his person. An example of this is the link-passage that Mark uses to introduce our text. It reads:

He arose and went away to the region of Tyre and Sidon. And he entered a house and did not want anyone to know...

Now, Tyre and Sidon lay far north and well west of Jesus' usual territory, and in their piety many Christian readers have seen in his journey our Lord's desire to expand the mission field into new territory, to take the Good New of the Kingdom not only to Phoenicia but through Phoenician ports to the whole Mediterranean world.

But the best commentators on Saint Mark urge us to follow closely the text: Jesus leaves where he has been working, goes far away, and checks into a house where, he hopes, no one will find him. What does that sound like to you? Yes, a man seeking to take a vacation, to find seclusion and rest from his labors. In other words, Mark has recorded here that in the limitations of his human strength the Son of God once not only sought to take a well-earned break – but in this instance failed to find it! His hope for a brief vacation collapsed because the Good News of his Messianic power to heal and save had traveled so fast and far ahead of him – the Kingdom of God was spreading with such power and speed – that, when Jesus gets far away from home, a Greek-speaking foreigner comes knocking on his door and pleading.

When our Lord Jesus Christ left the Jordan valley to proclaim the Kingdom and bring it in his person and work, he went as one sent by a Father whose urgent desire was to reach sinners. When Jesus went forth from the Jordan, he did so in the power of the Holy Spirit, who throughout the Gospels impels him forward from one scene to another, from one stage to another, on the way to the cross. What Mark does not refrain from revealing, and what should not embarrass us, is that at times this divine imperative to proclaim the Gospel to all creation tested even the limits of Jesus' physical and mental stamina. In this we see how strong the yearning is in the heart of God the Father to save.

Now that we have this lesson in mind, we may look at the two episodes themselves. When we do so, we find that they work together to drive home three basic points in what should be our missiology. There is nothing extraordinary about these three; their importance, rather, comes from how often the Church has failed to take them seriously.

The first does have to do with the geography of Tyre & Sidon. It is, after all, globally significant that this conversation takes place not far from the maritime gateway to Africa and Spain and France. For it is God's desire and Jesus' command to his church apostolic that we carry his name and his story into every land, among people of every culture and tongue. Here's one fact: When this Syro-Phoenician mother in need says to Jesus, "Yes, Lord, but even the dogs..." she is the first person in Mark's Gospel to call him Lord. The Lord's commission for us to initiate and sustain global missions has never expired.

#2: As Jesus' conversation with the woman bears out, there is now in the New Testament Age of the Gospel no single chosen people whom God prefers. The table from which the crumbs fall shall

have become, before all is accomplished, the Holy Supper at which people of every nation and income level may feast as one. The table where God's children eat becomes in the end the Messianic Banquet that men and women of every social status, tribe, and tongue shall share in heaven.

Third, as we see so vividly in how Christ touches the deaf-mute and restores his powers, the same love of God that sends his church forth to save men's souls sends them also to have concern, and to address with acts of mercy, their physical needs in this world. There has always lain at hand the temptation to turn all the healing miracles of Christ into metaphors, to translate the physical actions into spiritual realities. But if we do this, we ignore what it meant that the Son of God redeemed us by truly and fully sharing our human flesh and blood.

In 1965 we as the Synod in convention discussed and adopted what is remembered simply as the Mission Affirmations. Now those were days of growing controversy, and this document was no exception. Much that the document asserts certainly welcomes debate. But three of the major Affirmations read as follows:

1. The Church Is God's Mission..That is, He is the great Doer and Sender...
2. The Church Is Christ's Mission to the Whole World. Thus, Christians affirm a common humanity with all men...confess a common sinfulness... and rejoice over a universal redemption won for all in Jesus Christ...
3. The Church is God's mission to the whole society and to the whole man... that is, in body, soul, and mind.

When we elected the Rev. Matthew Harrison to serve as our synodical president, the vast majority of us were caught by surprise at how from the start he emphasized both doctrinal purity and missions of mercy. Some of us knew about his great love for classic devotional literature; we did not know that his was a heart driven by humanitarian concern to engage in political action, and to never cease pleading for generous assistance to the poor. Whatever his flaws may be or his mistakes, he reminds of what the color green means – that in our lives and work we should show that the only life we seek to have as the church is the life of Christ; and that we go into the world with all the concerns for our fellow human beings that flow from the heart of him who sent to us Jesus Christ our Lord. ☩