

JESUS TRAVELS ABROAD

James 2.1–10, 14–17 & Mark 7.24–37

Introduction

It is that time of year when life is returning to normal after the summer holiday period. Perhaps you have been lucky enough to travel somewhere for a holiday. Some like to go to another country where you have new experiences and the chance to do that can be as good as a rest. Sometimes you can come across surprising or amusing things. Someone is reported to have seen a notice on a bus in Orlando:

"When you exit the bus, please be sure to lower your head and watch your step."

"If you miss your step and hit your head, please lower your voice and watch your language. Thank you."

Jesus tries to get away from it all

In today's gospel reading Jesus goes to stay in a house and does not want people to know he is there. There may be different explanations for this, but one which makes sense to me is that he had gone to another country to try and get some rest. Mark tells us that Jesus and his disciples travelled to the region of Tyre. This was an area outside of Galilee, Jesus' home territory. To go abroad like that could be considered to be stepping outside the area of God's blessing for his people Israel. The Jewish people were very cautious about travelling very far and some even though it made you ritually unclean to step outside the Promised Land. But Jesus needed to rest, and he didn't think that going abroad was bad. He had already said that it is not what touches you or goes into you that makes you impure but what comes from inside your heart.

So he wanted to be quiet and rest from always responding to the needs of the people around him. But Mark says this was futile, because even in Tyre word soon got around that a healer was present. A non-Jewish woman finds him and there follows a conversation which gives a surprise about Jesus: he appears to treat the lady in a very rude way. Why should he be like that when she has come to ask him to heal her daughter?

Crumbs for the dogs

This story is also told by Matthew who says that at first Jesus wouldn't even speak to the lady. Then when his disciples persuade him to talk to her he

says that it is not right to feed the children's food to the dogs. In Matthew's version, Jesus starts off by saying that his mission is only to Israel. The children are Israel and the food is his mission. Jesus uses language that the Israelites usually used of Gentiles – they were “dogs”. It may seem extremely disrespectful to us, but that may have been normal for them. To her credit, the woman joins in with Jesus' language. She gives as good as she gets when she says, “Yes, but even crumbs from the children's food gets eaten by the dogs.” She is willing to do anything to get her daughter healed and Jesus is impressed by her attitude and quick wit. In Matthew's version Jesus says that she has great faith and pronounces her daughter whole.

Open up!

Mark then tells us about another experience Jesus had of being abroad. The region of the Decapolis (Greek for 10 towns) was also outside Israel and had a majority Gentile population. Jesus travels there and meets a man who was deaf and couldn't speak properly. What strikes me about this story is that Jesus dealt with the man as an individual. He had learnt to treat the Gentile woman not as a dog but as a person of faith. Now Jesus meets a different sort of person, most likely a Gentile, and deals with him according to his particular needs. He draws him privately aside to avoid the shouting friends. He uses a kind of made-up sign language in order to help the man know what he intends to do. He touches his ears and tongue. Spit was thought to have healing properties. Jesus communicates with the man directly and speaks a single word that is easy to lip-read: Mark even remembers the original Aramaic word Jesus used: “*Eph-pha-tha!*” which means “Be opened!” Mark tells us that the man could hear and speak again.

Travelling to get away

We may have been thinking about Jesus or ourselves travelling away for a while to get some rest – for a change of air, as we say. But the news at the moment is filled with families seeking to travel and settle abroad permanently. They are not leaving their homes for a fortnight's break, they are fleeing unbearable situations and seeking asylum or a bearable living for the foreseeable future. To start with a great deal of media coverage has been on the more negative aspects of such large numbers of people seeking entry into Europe. No doubt there are bad things that have been happening. It can't be right for an innocent truck driver who has stowaways he hasn't invited to be fined thousands of pounds. It can't be right for the channel tunnel to be blocked by hundreds risking their lives trying to walk through it.

It is also criminal for human traffickers on the coast of North Africa to take advantage of people's desperation and pack them into leaky boats which are dangerously overcrowded. Regrettably some parts of the media use fear-based ways of reporting about those who want to come and live in Europe. To call them "swarms" is also a way of dehumanising African or Asian people wanting to settle here. The fact is that even though the numbers may seem high they are not. In a recent article Human Rights Watch points out that the 340,000 recent irregular would-be immigrants to Europe represent 0.068% of Europe's 500 million citizens. We need to be wary of fear-mongering based on numbers – we are not being overtaken by swarms of people from overseas. We also need to be wary of the language being used. The word that has been favoured by some sections of the media to describe people wanting to settle in Europe is "migrant" – which has been often twinned with "economic". But the vast majority of those who make the hazardous journey to our shores are actually *refugees*. They are fleeing unbearable situations, they choose to leave their homes behind rather than risk dying, being persecuted or imprisoned.

Recovering our sense of humanity

Many come from Syria, the edge of which Jesus visited when he healed the deaf and dumb man. In a place where many go on holiday, the body of 3 year old Aylan Kurdi was found on a beach near Bodrum, Turkey. His family was from Kobane and his father has now returned to bury his wife and sons who all died. Many other heart-rending photos have been taken and circulated by photo journalists. These all bring out the humanity of all of us. They show the humanity of individuals who are suffering and our sense of humanity makes us respond with compassion rather than fear. Jesus treated the deaf and dumb man as an individual human. Jesus overcame the prejudiced attitude of his people to heal a foreigner's daughter. James wrote to his Christian friends, *What good is it...if you say you have faith but do not have works?...if a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them 'Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill' and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that?'* Fortunately now many stories of European citizens acting in compassionate ways are now emerging in the media. An ordinary German spending her holiday helping to distribute aid to people arriving in Munich from having crossed Hungary. Others who set up impromptu language lessons for refugees. People organising aid trips to the camp on the edge of Calais. I've heard ordinary church members this week expressing dismay at the human suffering they've seen and feeling the need to respond in some way. I've posted links both to

Toilet Twinning and to CalAid on the St James Facebook page this week. Both of these provide ways in which we can respond to human need and express our Christian commitment to living out our faith in compassionate action. We also support Christian Aid and the Food Cupboard regularly.

Conclusion

Jesus said to the deaf and dumb man. “Be opened!” Perhaps his word to us is similar: “Be opened!” not from being deaf and dumb but let our hearts be open to respond to the needs of others who suffer wherever they come from and whoever they are. They are neither dogs nor swarms of faceless people: they are humans like you and I. Of course it costs, but then it cost Jesus his life to rescue us from sin and death – something which we celebrate every week when we gather in church.