

# main course

## encounters in Mark's Gospel – six

### *Jesus and a Gentile woman – Mk7.24-30*

This is one of a number of '**encounters in Mark's Gospel**' each of which enables a small-group conversation around a particular story in Mark's Gospel. These conversations aim to help you, and everyone else in your group, to:

- build up your **confidence** in actively exploring bits of the Bible
- **make connections** between the biblical story and your own life story
- find fresh **vision** for the business of being human today

all from watching and talking freely with each other about encounters between Jesus and those he meets – as we find them recorded in Mark's Gospel.

#### INTRODUCTION

This sixth **encounter in Mark's Gospel** is unlike any of the others. Jesus is right outside his known world and right outside his comfort zone – and it shows. As Mark tells it, he's hoping to pass unknown and unchallenged, but it doesn't work out that way. There's learning to be done here, so watch carefully and see what you can see.

#### STRUCTURE

Each of your **encounters in Mark's Gospel** will follow the same basic structure:

1. Assembling and beginning
2. Sharing the story of the encounter
3. Our initial reactions - sharing our own first responses
4. Extra Insights 1 – learning from Mark's big story
5. Extra Insights 2 – learning about Jesus' world
6. Exploring the Encounter Triangle
  - What do we think was learned from encountering Jesus?
  - What do we think Jesus learned from the encounter?
  - What have we learned from watching the encounter?
7. Deciding how that helps us to live now
8. *(optional)* Rounding it off with a song

# main course

## encounters in Mark's Gospel – six

### *Jesus and a Gentile woman – Mk7.24-30*

#### 1. ASSEMBLING and BEGINNING

The group needs to gather, settle in and prepare for a shared conversation. This may or may not include prayer or worship or some catering option, depending on your local circumstances and context.

#### 2. SHARING THE STORY

The conversation is started by hearing or sharing the story that will form its focus – the story told in **Mark 7.24-30**. This might be done in one of the following ways:

- Someone reads **Mark 7.24-30** straight from their Bible
- The group re-constructs the story of **Mark 7.24-30** from various rememberings
- The story of **Mark 7.24-30** is told by someone who has prepared it for telling
- A locally-devised combination of some of the above

**Mark 7.24-30** is one of those stories that is also present in Matthew's Gospel but with significant differences in the details given, so if your group uses a remembering and re-telling approach you are going to have to decide how closely you all want to keep to Mark's particular telling.

#### 3. OUR INITIAL REACTIONS

The group should then consider the question:

- **“What is this story about?”**

This can be done with a brief time of discussion in twos and threes followed by reporting to the whole group, or done as a whole group conversation – as group size and local practice allow. Let's be clear, there's no 'right' answer to this question – it's simply an assembling of ways in which hearing the story has struck group members and their memories of how they have learned its 'meaning' from past encounters and received teaching.

#### 4. EXTRA INSIGHTS part one – learning from Mark's big story

Share the information about how Mark has used this story and where he's placed it in his big story that's given in the EXTRA INSIGHTS on **page 6** at the end of these notes

#### 5. EXTRA INSIGHTS part two – learning about Jesus' world

Share the information about the social, political and religious world in which Jesus lived that's given in the EXTRA INSIGHTS on **page 7** at the end of these notes

# main course

## encounters in Mark's Gospel – six

### Jesus and a Gentile woman – Mk7.24-30

#### 6. EXPLORING THE ENCOUNTER TRIANGLE

The group takes time to explore the story (in the light of their initial ideas and the Extra Insights that they've shared), standing, in turn, at each corner of the triangle:

Standing and looking at the story from the perspective of the Gentile woman, consider:

- **What do we think this Gentile woman learned from meeting Jesus?**
  - *teasing this out ... What caused this woman to seek Jesus' help? What happened? Why did she persist when rebuffed? What do you think she made of Jesus as she returned home & then when she found her daughter?*

Standing and looking at the story from Jesus' perspective, consider:

- **What do we think Jesus learned from this altercation and its outcome?**
  - *teasing this out ... What were Jesus' concerns before this woman came? What was Jesus trying to say to her? What do you think changed his mind? What might this altercation have changed for Jesus?*

Standing where we stand, watching the whole encounter, consider:

- **What have we learned from watching these proceedings?**
  - *teasing this out ... What previous understandings of this story did we bring? What have we found in the story this time? What about this story connects with our own stories? What do we take away from watching this encounter together?*

#### 7. HOW DOES THAT HELP US TO LIVE NOW?

Now your group needs to bring it all home. Working as a group, consider two questions:

- **In what ways does this story speak to us today?**

*Be imaginative. Be playful. Be daring. Be incredibly serious. Try ideas. Disagree. Come to a consensus. Work with the story like you're squeezing oranges. What good ideas to help us with living now can the group find from what you have watched?*

- **What are we going to do differently now?**

*Be practical. Be realistic. But be prepared to face the risks and challenges the story raises. Honestly address what the story seems to be saying to you and your situation as individuals, but also as a group, in your church and in your local community.*

# main course

## encounters in Mark's Gospel – six

### *Jesus and a Gentile woman – Mk7.24-30*

#### 8. ROUNDING IT OFF WITH A SONG (optional)

**JESUS IN A CORNER** based on Mark 7.24-30      tune: Aurelia, Rejoice and Sing no. 566

1.

Unwanted interruption  
disturbing hard won peace;  
a pressure put upon You  
just when you'd found release;  
this woman and her anguish  
intrude with honest pain,  
demanding understanding -  
though, seemingly, in vain.

2.

Did pressures of the moment  
prevent a kind reply -  
upwellings of raw anger  
resist, refuse, deny?  
Or did Your people's story  
of holiness apart  
constrict Your way of seeing,  
exclude her from the start?

3.

Still, somehow, all undaunted,  
she would not be denied -  
no sharp-tongued, bitter rudeness  
could push her hope aside.  
Persistently and wisely,  
she turned Your words around;  
she cut through Your resistance  
claimed crumbs could still be found.

4.

And so two healings happened -  
her daughter was set free -  
but with new understanding  
You surely came to see  
that grace and lovingkindness,  
if true to what God meant,  
must reach to all who need them,  
show limitless intent.

5.

Thank God, then, for that woman  
and what she did for You,  
the healing she enabled  
must touch us, change us too.  
When prejudiced or stubborn,  
or drained of all our good,  
then may we too know healing  
to live the way we should.

*John M. Campbell*

# main course

## encounters in Mark's Gospel – six

### *Jesus and a Gentile woman – Mk7.24-30*

#### EVALUATION

Please try to answer these questions for yourself and for others who will use this material:

1. What was the most helpful thing?
2. What was the least helpful thing?
3. What would you like to try now?

#### THE NEXT STEP

This is one of a number of **encounters in Mark's Gospel** that are being offered through the Vision4Life website. Between them these conversation materials explore a whole range of different encounters that Jesus has in the course of the Gospel story. If your group found this one helpful they may wish to try some of the others.

*Full acknowledgement for the ideas and information that have helped us to construct these materials is given in the **Introduction** to the 'encounters in Mark's Gospel' programme on the Vision4Life website:*

[www.vision4life.org.uk](http://www.vision4life.org.uk)

see the following two pages for the "Extra Insights" materials for this conversation...

# main course

encounters in Mark's Gospel – six

*Jesus and a Gentile woman – Mk7.24-30*

## EXTRA INSIGHTS

### part one – learning from Mark's big story

What can we learn from the stories Mark places both before and after our story and from the way our story works in the whole- Gospel storyline?:

#### The bit before our bit (Mk 7.1-23)

- **A very Jewish dispute** – Jesus here shares a sharp dispute with Pharisees and scribes (who believe themselves to be the most careful and trustworthy interpreters of the Holy Scriptures and the traditions of the elders that control all interpretation). Yet Jesus, this Galilean village preacher (who makes no claim to having studied with any recognised rabbi) takes them on. Indeed, he does so without any sign of respect or deference, challenging their whole interpretive tradition, exposing it as self-serving and deeply unfair. This makes for vigorous, exhausting in-your-face ministry – no wonder he needs to get right away to recover, and re-focus himself.

#### The bit after our bit (Mk 7.31-37)

- **A ministry resumed and widened** – the next story shows the resumption of Jesus' ministry, but now it is openly continuing in a largely Gentile region and the deaf man whom he heals (who is probably a Gentile) shows the same spirited refusal to keep silent that Jesus found with the Galilean Jewish people he healed before. Jesus is at the height of his powers and his popularity. It seems as if he can do no wrong. He is beginning to look convincingly like God's chosen Messiah.

#### Our story in the flow of Mark's whole-Gospel story

- Jesus has been pursuing his ministry all over the region of Galilee, crossing and re-crossing the sea, preaching and healing and having intense disputes with Pharisees and scribes, all without any let up. Soon he will be heading relentlessly towards Jerusalem, towards even more intense confrontations with the religious authorities in the temple, towards political showdown with the mighty Romans, towards the total, public abandonment of Golgotha. Here is his only attempt to pause, reflect and recover. Yet, even here, hidden away in an anonymous house in a distant town far from the centre of his active ministry, he is tracked down, and his help urgently sought. Can there be no peace for the Son of Man, for 'the truly human one'?

# main course

## encounters in Mark's Gospel – six

### *Jesus and a Gentile woman – Mk7.24-30*

## EXTRA INSIGHTS

### part two – learning about Jesus' world

#### Jesus and Gentiles

Jesus has clearly mixed with Gentiles before – it would have been almost impossible to avoid doing so in Galilee in his day. For Galilee was a very mixed region with major Gentile settlements such as Sepphoris (near Nazareth) and Caesarea Philippi. But we never hear of Jesus visiting such places and his ministry clearly has a very Jewish focus. Even so, he has crossed the Sea of Galilee to what appear to be Gentile areas where the madman called 'Legion', whom he healed, was probably a Gentile (Mk 5.1-20). Yet, overall Jesus seems to show a certain wariness of too much engagement with Gentiles – a wariness that would fit with the idea that his ministry was first and foremost to God's 'children' – the people of Israel. On this occasion, Mark makes it clear that he had not come to the region of Tyre to engage in a ministry to Gentiles, but simply to get away, to find a hidden place to rest.

#### Teasing or rudeness?

It seems clear that in implying that this woman and her kind were 'dogs' Jesus is saying something that is deeply insulting. Dogs were seen as filthy scavengers to be chased away, not cherished as house pets. So, the question remains, did he engage in this apparent rudeness with a certain teasing playfulness, or was he serious and deliberately insulting? A number of scholars opt for a teasing Jesus - but this might be an easy way out, a means of rescuing our Jesus from appearing rude. He was exhausted and had just succeeded in getting away to somewhere safe so he might let down his guard for a while – is this a likely time for a joke? So, is it possible that Jesus was, out of his exhaustion, reduced to a sharp rudeness and an easy quoting of the sort of negative comments about Gentiles that he must have heard around him regularly in his home community ever since he was a child?

#### How many healings?

Might Jesus have been schooled into the shared assumptions of his home community about the obvious inferiority of Gentiles? He certainly took a vigorously independent line about the tradition of the elders in the story before this (Mk 7.1-23), but did that mean he had already worked out the right and wrong of **everything** he had been nurtured to accept as true? Might this woman's artful challenge have opened up for him a whole new area of assumptions that he would have to foreswear if he was to be true to himself and his God? If he had to grow up like us, and learn like us, might this story be a vivid picture of him learning about ingrained cultural assumptions and how they have to be identified and thrown aside? Might Jesus himself be being healed right before our eyes, even whilst he is healing the unseen daughter of this determined mother? Might that make him **better** able to help us? For we, in our turn, have to try to assess the right and wrong of the cultural values which we have been led to assume were obviously true.