

Mark 7:24-37

Almost overnight, Emma Raducanu has become an inspiration and a role model for young girls and boys across the world. Storming to victory in only her second grand slam tennis tournament last weekend and at just 18 years old. It's no surprise that her instagram account now boasts over 1.8M followers.

But I wonder how many of those 1.8M followers will soon start to feel pretty inadequate in comparison. Having role-models who we can look up to and who can inspire us is a great thing, I'm sure many of us can think of people whether famous or part of our lives who have done that for us. But what happens when we don't measure up?

That feeling of inadequacy is sadly all too common in the church as well. How many times have you looked around at other Christians and wished you were as godly or well presented as them? Sadly this message can sometimes come from the front as well.

A relative of mine who no longer goes to church told me a few years ago that her lasting memory of going to Sunday school was being told she was a sinner.

We've been introduced to two characters in our Bible reading this morning who in the world's eyes did not measure up. But we're going to see that when they encounter Jesus, they find in him, not condemnation, but not a role model either.

What they find is grace. Grace that changes everything for them and gives them everything they need.

So as we encounter Jesus with them this morning, my hope is that they will inspire us to see afresh the grace that he is ready to pour out on whoever will receive it.

1. See the abundance of his grace (24-30)

Jesus is near a place called Tyre which is new territory for him, foreign, non-Jewish territory. He's trying to keep a low profile but his fame has spread and so:

7:25-26a as soon as she heard about him, a woman whose little daughter was possessed by an impure spirit came and fell at his feet. The woman was a Greek, born in Syrian Phoenicia.

A Gentile woman with a demon-possessed daughter. She had everything going against her. And yet she boldly,

7:26b She begged Jesus to drive the demon out of her daughter.

This is where it gets a bit uncomfortable for us, but it's a discomfort we need to experience if we're going to see the abundance of his grace.

7:27 "First let the children eat all they want," he told her, "for it is not right to take the children's bread and toss it to the dogs."

Mark must have got this wrong. Did Jesus really just imply that this poor, desperate woman was a dog?

If you think that sounds offensive today it would have been even more offensive then, a common insult for people thought of as unclean.

Is Jesus having an off day? Feeling a bit grumpy? Worse, is Jesus racist?

We saw last week that he challenged the religious leaders of the day and taught that our uncleanness doesn't come from the outside but from our sinful hearts, putting us all, Jew & Gentile in the same boat. And everything we hear him say and see him do shows us his kingdom is radically inclusive.

So there must be something deeper going on here. Let's keep listening.

7:28 "Lord," she replied, "even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs."

She takes him on! She doesn't disagree with his caricature of her but owns it and still refuses to be denied his grace. Perhaps she had heard how he fed over 5000 people until they were satisfied and there were 12 basketfuls leftover.

I'll have those leftovers! Just a crumb of your grace will be more than enough for me!

7:29 Then he told her, "For such a reply, you may go; the demon has left your daughter." She went home and found her child lying on the bed, and the demon was gone.

She was right. Not just that there was a crumb for her, but that that crumb was more than enough for her. Such is the abundance of his grace that just a crumb could free her little girl from a terrible demon.

The kingdom of God is breaking new ground here and that was a shocking thing. This Syro-Phoenician woman had no claim on a Jewish Messiah and so Jesus gives the offensive but expected reply to see if she can see that there is more to him than everybody might be expecting. That he is different.

Jesus draws out her faith and shocks those listening including us into realising that his grace is enough for even those we perceive to be beyond it.

See the abundance of his grace.

This woman saw it and refused to be left out of it. She refused to let everything that she had going against her get in the way of an encounter with Jesus that she knew could change her life and the life of her little girl. She doesn't try to defend or justify herself.

This is what it means to have faith isn't it? To have faith is not to pretend we're somehow worthy or adequate. None of us are! To have faith is to acknowledge all of the ways we don't measure up and yet to come boldly before Jesus begging him to save us because we see that his grace is even more abundant than our sin.

A child should never leave Sunday school and all they can remember is being told they were a sinner. But just being told they are special and unique and full of potential won't help them either.

I need to know I'm a sinner, and then I need to see that no matter how abundant my sin, Jesus' grace is more. A single crumb of his grace is enough to rescue me, restore me and transform my life.

There is a prayer that is sometimes used just before communion in the CofE service called the prayer of humble access that I think is really helpful here.

*We do not presume to come to this your table, O merciful
Lord,
trusting in our own righteousness,
but in your abundant and great mercies.
We are not worthy so much as to gather up
the crumbs under your table;
but you are the same Lord
whose character is always to have mercy.*

We have a place at his table not because we are worthy but because he is merciful. In his kingdom I do measure up, I am adequate... not because I am enough but because his grace is enough.

2. See the power of his grace (31-37)

Still in largely Gentile, non-Jewish territory we now meet a very different character and with a very different need but one which was just as great.

7:32 There some people brought to him a man who was deaf and could hardly talk, and they begged Jesus to place his hand on him.

And then Mark goes into quite a lot of detail describing how Jesus takes him aside, puts his fingers into the man's ears, spits and touches his tongue, then

7:34 He looked up to heaven and with a deep sigh said to him, 'Ephphatha!' (which means 'Be opened!'). At this, the man's ears were opened, his tongue was loosed and he began to speak plainly.

Why all this detail, why all these actions? We know Jesus could have just said the word and the man would have been healed.

Imagine you are the man. You can't hear, anything. But you can see, and you can feel. And you see as Jesus takes you away from the prying crowd.

You look into his eyes and feel as his fingers touch your ears. You feel as he touches your tongue and watch as he looks up to heaven and you understand.

You understand that he is opening your deaf ears and mute mouth by the power of the Almighty God.

See the power of my grace for you, Jesus is saying.

We can get so used to reading about Jesus' miracles that we sometimes lose sight of how powerful his grace is!

People were overwhelmed with amazement and so we should be too.

7:37 "He has done everything well," they said. "He even makes the deaf hear and the mute speak."

See the power of his grace. Long before this happened God spoke through his prophet Isaiah.

Isaiah 35:1-6a The desert and the parched land will be glad; the wilderness will rejoice and blossom. Like the crocus, it will burst into bloom... Strengthen the feeble hands, steady the knees that give way; say to those with fearful hearts, 'Be strong, do not fear; your God will come, he will come with vengeance; with divine retribution he will come to save you. Then will the eyes of the blind be opened and the ears of the dead unstopped. Then will the lame lead like a deer and the mute tongue shout for joy.

The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the Good News!

If your hands are feeling feeble this morning if your knees are giving way if your hearts are fearful... lift your eyes and see the power of his grace. Whatever the brokenness, Jesus has come to turn it into blossom. Jesus doesn't give this man a pep-talk or tools to help him realise his potential. He pours out his grace and opens him up to receive healing and transformation.

Whether you have been following Jesus for years or you are just getting to know him do you see the abundance and the power of his grace. Grace that is enough for you and strong enough for you, whatever your sin or suffering.

Grace can be hard for us to grasp because we so want to bring something, to contribute something to our place at his table. We like to feel like somehow we deserve it or can earn it. Let these two faith-filled characters be our role-models. They both came to Jesus with nothing and they left overflowing with his grace.

Nothing in my hand I bring, simply to thy cross I cling. Naked come to thee for dress, helpless, look to thee for grace. Foul I to the fountain fly, wash me Saviour, or I die. Rock of Ages, cleft for me, let me ride myself in thee.