

Views from the Pews - Jesus visits the Gentiles

Mark 7:24-27 describes two excursions Jesus made to areas inhabited mostly by Gentiles. First, v 24 reports that he went from Gennesaret to Tyre, on the Mediterranean coast, a distance of about 55 km. By v 31 Mark says that he had moved from Tyre via Sidon (40 km north) back inland, crossing the Jordan north of the Sea of Galilee, and continuing south for some 90 km past its eastern shore to Gadara, about 10 km southeast from the lake shore in the region of the Decapolis. Why did he undertake such long journeys, all on foot and well outside Judea?

The previous texts explain why. Mark 6: 54-56 describes the chaotic consequences of his visit to Gennesaret, where he had been mobbed by people desperate for his healing touch. Shortly afterwards, Mark 7:1-23 describes a hostile encounter with the Pharisees, who criticised his disciples' behaviour and cynically set tradition above obedience to God's commandments. Jesus replies with a passionate and stinging quotation from Isaiah 29:13, adding a comment that:

‘Isaiah prophesied rightly about you hypocrites, as it is written, “This people honours me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me.” In vain do they worship me, teaching human precepts as doctrines. You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition’.

So it is entirely understandable that Jesus sought refuge in Gentile communities. But even there, he could not escape notice. Mark 8: 24 comments that in Tyre, ‘He entered a house and did not want anyone to know he was there’. Yet his compassion for the Syrophoenician woman overcame his reluctance to heal her daughter afflicted with a demon, and thereby reveal his identity. That required him to move on, back to Gentile territory the long way round.

But even there people followed him, bringing him a deaf-mute, beseeching him to heal his lifetime's suffering. Jesus could not resist, but tried to do it quietly.

‘He took him aside in private, away from the crowd...immediately his ears were opened, his tongue was released, and he spoke plainly. Then Jesus ordered them to tell no one; but the more he ordered them, the more zealously they proclaimed it’. (Mark 7:33-36).

Among many other sufferings, Jesus must have endured repeated inner conflicts between his compassion for the desperate sick and his need to concentrate on his real work of proclaiming the Kingdom of God.

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