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The Lord Is in This Place (Mark 7. 24-31)

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Let's start with the usual interpretive questions connected with this passage. Just before the story we heard, Jesus had been disputing with the religious authorities about his disciples' eating with 'defiled hands' (Mark 7.1). The Pharisees and some of the scribes had complained at Jesus' failure to enforce observance of ritual washing.¹ Jesus had accused them of hypocrisy, of caring more about the ceremonial cleanness of hands, cooking vessels and so on, than the inward cleanness of the heart. He'd proclaimed that it's what comes out rather than what enters into a person that defiles, and thus, in Mark's words, he 'declared all foods clean' (Mark 7.19).

Yet, immediately, Jesus himself appears to have become entangled in the very categories of clean and unclean he's just dispensed with. 'From there', the gospel narrates, 'he set out and went away to the region of Tyre', which is north of the Sea of Galilee in current day Lebanon. This is Gentile country, non-Jewish, and Jesus is apparently seeking respite from the crowds and the hostility of the authorities. 'He entered a house and did not want anyone to know he was there'. But 'he could not escape notice'. His solitude was encroached upon by a woman of Syro-phoenician origin who begged him to 'cast the demon out of her daughter'. There follows an unsettling exchange, in which Jesus seems both rude and unhelpful, ostensibly still driven by his own racial bias, before being persuaded by the woman's persistence and humility to act as she requests.

Well, as you can imagine, litres of homiletic ink have been spilt trying to work this out. Was Jesus just testing this woman, inviting her to prove her faith? Was he acting so as to force his future disciples to grapple with their own prejudice? Was he

¹ This practice concerned not so much basic cleanliness as a 'ceremonial purity' that was, according to Bonnie Thurston, 'nearly impossible for ordinary people to achieve'. Bonnie Thurston, *Preaching Mark* (Minneapolis, MI: Fortress Press), p.83.

simply weary and fed up, a man of his time and culture still growing in understanding about the universality of his mission and the commonality of the human family? There are things to be said for each of these possibilities, and I think it's also worth noting the adventurousness of the gospel writers in including this story at all! But because we're in the Season of Creation, I want to raise some different questions about this passage. I'm interested in the significance of the location of this encounter, and thus more generally in the significance of place in the biblical imagination.

Biblical texts are saturated with reference to place. There's a geography of sacred encounter that can be traced from the Jordan River to the Sea of Galilee to the Nile; from the cities of Jerusalem and Jericho to Babylon, Damascus and Rome; from the hill country around Nazareth to the mountains of Sinai and Carmel. Always, in biblical literature, encounter with God is depicted as occurring in particular locations at particular times in particular embodied ways. Yet having said this, the God who purportedly meets the protagonists in Scripture is not a local deity connected with, say, a sacred spring or grove or mountain or shrine. God is the Creator of the whole world, the one God of all. This suggests that the particularity of the places where God becomes manifest is purely incidental. It could have happened anywhere since God is by definition everywhere and everywhen.

So, there seems an implicit tension in the biblical treatment of place. On the one hand, location is important. When Jacob is sent away by his father Isaac after stealing his brother's birthright, he's said to come 'to a certain place' and stay there for the night. In the story that follows, the text goes out of its way to repeat the word for 'place'. Jacob takes one of the stones of the place, puts it under his head and 'lays down in that place'. He dreams of a ladder on which angels are ascending and descending between heaven and earth, and the Lord appears to him in the dream promising that his offspring will populate (effectively) every place: 'you shall spread abroad to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south, and all the families of the earth shall be blessed in you and in your offspring', says the Lord. Yet

the place where Jacob now is remains at the centre. 'Know that I am with you', says God, 'and will keep you wherever you go and will bring you back to this land'. And when Jacob wakes he says, 'Surely the Lord is in this place – and I did not know it' and 'How awesome is this place!' (Genesis 28. 10-17)

On the other hand, in the story of his meeting with the woman at the well in John's gospel, Jesus seems explicitly to disconnect encounter with God from any kind of sacred geography. The woman says to him: 'Our ancestors worshipped on this mountain, but you say that the place where people must worship is in Jerusalem', and Jesus replies: 'Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem ... when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth' (John 4. 19-23). Similarly, in the story we just heard of his encounter with another foreign woman, the same assumption seems to hold. The power of God is active and may be encountered anywhere, and the determining factor is not geographical location but human open-heartedness and faith.

In my own reading of the bible, I realise I simply assume a non-localised sense of God. I relate to geographical references to Jesus' journeys around the holy land as mere backdrop – narrative filler which helps delineate between episodes whose real import is contained in human words and deeds. In tonight's passage, then, the reference to 'Tyre' has seemed significant to me only insofar as it signals that Jesus is in Gentile territory. But Tyre as a place with its own story, identity and location in a landscape is rendered completely invisible and irrelevant, as is the arduous journey on foot that Jesus has taken to get there.

So what's wrong with that? Well, what's wrong – or at least what I'm wondering – is how lacking a sense of the significance of place affects our way of being on the earth. Scholars in a range of disciplines have noted that in the Western imagination the experience of place has been eclipsed in favour of an emphasis on undifferentiated or neutral space, as if our environment is just an 'inert container' for what happens. Geographer Anne Buttner notes, for example, that in many

contexts there's been a 'weakening of the identity of places to the point where they not only look alike but feel alike and offer the same bland possibilities for experience'.² Think of the globalized homogeneity of shopping malls, airports, freeways, office blocks and hospitals. A loss of care for and attachment to place may serve economic values such as 'mobility, centralization or rationalisation', and yet it seems ultimately diminishing. Not only do these kinds of undifferentiated space generate alienation in those of us who inhabit them; they're part of a system in which many are often literally displaced, turned into economic migrants or refugees, while the places of the natural world become mere repositories of economic resource.

This isn't all the bible's fault; it's the culmination of philosophical, technological and economic developments over centuries. Yet, there does seem an unsettling trajectory from the biblical shift from tribal to universal religion, through the understanding that 'in Christ' the significance of the particularity 'not only of race, but of place'³ has broken down, to our contemporary state of alienation. All this contrasts starkly with an Australian indigenous sense of place as primary. Here there is no neutral space, no territory without a story. Speaking of her relationship to Land, for example, the late Arrente elder M.K. Turner said there's a phrase in her language which means 'a place everywhere' or 'everywhere is a place'. There is no space that's not part of relationship, no space that's not a 'place'. On this vision of things, she says, 'our Land is as sacred as yourself, as a person like you are' with a story to tell and inviting connection. For example, 'If there's no track or pad, if you don't know where to go, the Land just like tells you. "Oh yeah! This is the way to that place" ... we can talk to the Land and who we are, and the Land'll always relate'.⁴ From this perspective, a very different ecological consciousness grows – a consciousness which attends to the particular gift and call of the places we are.

² Cited in John Inge, *A Christian Theology of Place* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003), p.17.

³ Inge, *A Christian Theology of Place*, p.29.

⁴ Margaret Kemarre Turner, *Iwenhe Tyerrtye – what it means to be an Aboriginal person* (Alice Springs: IAD Press, 2010), p.115.

So where does this leave us? For all its geographical references, to what extent is the biblical tradition implicated in the humanly and ecologically disastrous loss of the sense of place? Are there resources here for recovering a deeper reverence for the particularity of place, and so the fullness of belonging?

I find myself wanting to say a couple of things. First, there does seem something true and important about our tradition's sense of God's omnipresence. Its trust that the steadfast love of the Lord which never ceases is the universal background radiance of the life of all peoples, all places. There's nowhere that's godforsaken or where God cannot be. So whether Jesus is encountered at the edge of the Sea of Galilee or in a village called Tyre, the same power to liberate and restore is met with. And M.K. Turner seems to hold something at least analogous when she speaks of the 'living Spirit of the Land' which encompasses 'the whole Land, not just one land, the whole country', 'the places everywhere [she says]... joined together, their roots holding each other in relationship'.⁵

At the same time, this is an omnipresence that delights in rather than obliterates difference. In the biblical vision, creative love does not generate the bland homogeneity of the shopping mall or freeway, but blesses the emergence of manifold particularity. God – unlike many of us – is unthreatened by difference. And could this be part of what's drawn out by Jesus' exchange with the Syro-Phoenician woman? That she is different, that her people's story is not to be blandly assimilated to that of the children of Israel, and that she must meet with God on her own terms?

And perhaps what this suggests for us is that there's an invitation to attend more deeply to the particularity of the places we live, the places we visit, seeing them not simply as the stage set for our human preoccupations and drama but as bearers of stories with their own integrity and life. Jesuit peace activist Daniel Berrigan once said that resisting ecological destruction 'can be a slow work of being present to a place in the face of a transient, fast-paced world'.⁶ For paradoxically, the

⁵ Turner, *Iwenhe Tyerrtye*, p.115.

⁶ Cited in <https://cac.org/daily-meditations/fall-in-love-with-a-place/>, September 6, 2024.

more deeply I encounter the particularity of a place, as with the particularity of another person, the more I am opened to the Love that animates the whole and calls all that lives to be. For surely the Lord is in each place, if only we have eyes to see.