

# WEEKLY SERMON

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## A map for the Christian life

For my last birthday I was given a map of Blackburn. I should say that it dates from 1824 and I wasn't given it because I can't find my way around! Maps tell us a lot about what we think is important: which places are significant enough to mark; which are central.

Most modern world maps have Britain on the centreline, so it is easy to assume that we are at the centre of the universe. And however thoughtful or unselfish we might be, there is no escaping that we are at the centre of our own worlds. In contrast, Mediaeval maps have Britain on the edges, amongst dragons and sea monsters. It comes as a bit of a shock. As does the sphere of Jesus' ministry.

We might assume that gentiles were always at the heart of it, but Mark's Gospel tells us that a mission to the gentiles was not part of Jesus' original plan: they were on the fringes of his world. And yet the encounter between Jesus and a gentile Syrophoenician woman moves from an unpromising start to a demonstration of his compassion. He heals a young girl, and so gives hope and reassurance to gentiles and to those of us, all of us, who are outsiders.

Healing miracles can sit uneasily with current understanding of able-bodiedness and disability, difference and inclusivity, perhaps especially now as the Paralympics draw to a close. The Syrophoenician woman's daughter and the man who is deaf do not even ask for healing themselves.

But these miracles take place within a historical and cultural context where people with hearing or visual impairments and those struggling with physical or mental health would have found themselves on the margins of society. Jesus' miracles do not devalue those who cannot hear or see or walk but offer them inclusion.

When the Gospels record miracles, they are never just as signs of Jesus' power. Through each miracle Jesus also meets a pastoral need. The Letter of James challenges us to do the same: to live out our faith by welcoming and honouring those who are different from us and by meeting the material needs of those who are hungry, disadvantaged or struggling with daily life. Because faith isn't just about us and God, with us at the centre of the universe. Faith shown through action, care and compassion: this is James' map for the Christian life.

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