

# Recovering Eucharistic Crumbs: Re-reading Mark 7:24-30 for Liturgical Renewal

Gerald O. West

## ABSTRACT

---

This article reflects on how Mark 7:24-30 has been used in the Anglican liturgical prayer known as the “Prayer of Humble Access”, and analyses how a Contextual Bible Study with a local congregation has been used to create a safe and sacred space in which to interrogate the prayer’s understanding of this text and to envisage a more inclusive understanding of this text and of Anglican liturgy. The analysis draws explicitly on biblical scholarship which is engaged with the margins of the church and society and which carefully locates this Markan story within its literary-narrative and socio-historical context.

---

## Introduction

I have always been troubled by what is known as the “Prayer of Humble Access”: “We do not presume...”<sup>1</sup> This prayer has formed a component of Anglican liturgy since 1548<sup>2</sup> so it has a substantive theological pedigree. But as a biblical scholar the question that hovers over this prayer every time I kneel to take the Eucharist is how Thomas Cranmer, who composed it, and the generations of Anglican theologians, who have continued to include it in successive Prayer Books, have understood a constitutive gospel text which has been used, namely Mark 7:24-31 (and/or the parallel in Matthew 15:21-29).

Given my misgivings about the biblical theology lurking behind this prayer, shared by many who have gone before me,<sup>3</sup> I was delighted when, in August 2004, I was invited to preach at the Cathedral of the Holy Nativity in Pietermaritzburg, South Africa, and realised that Matthew’s version of this story (Matthew 15:21-

- 
- 1 Cynthia Briggs Kittredge, a biblical scholar and Anglican colleague, expresses a similar ambivalence, and documents a history of ambivalence; Cynthia Briggs Kittredge, “Not Worthy So Much as to Gather up the Crumbs under Thy Table: Reflection on the Sources and History of the Prayer of Humble Access,” *Sewanee Theological Review* 50, no. 1 (2006): 81.
  - 2 John Dowden, “A Contribution Towards the Study of the Prayer of Humble Access,” *The Irish Church Quarterly* 1, no. 1 (1908): 9.
  - 3 For an excellent analysis of the prayer’s historical construction and liturgical reception see Kittredge, “Reflection on the Sources and History of the Prayer of Humble Access,” 80-88.