

Sermon for Trinity 10, 16 August 2020

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Linking both Gospel and OT readings today are themes that run through human history and contemporary dramas- of murderous envy and rejection along with what is less common, generosity and abundance. Joseph, you may remember, was the most beloved younger son, with the coat of many colours, whose brothers could stand him no longer and planned to kill him, before selling him into slavery. Now, years later they have come to Egypt, desperate for food, unaware that the official they stand before is their brother now a grand vizier for the Pharaoh. Full of emotion, he sends everyone else out of the room, standing unrecognised before his brothers, he declares to them, “I am Joseph. Is my father still alive...?” His brothers are speechless . . . But more still is revealed, namely the abundance that will be given to them to take back home to their father...When the brothers robbed their father of his favourite son and sold him to foreigners they broke the blood bonds of kinship; it is as a slave that Joseph enters Egypt....but it is not a slave that they now encounter.

Then consider our gospel reading and the Canaanite woman, a member of a despised group, who keeps shouting to Jesus to free her daughter from demonic possession, only to be first ignored and then rejected, because she does not belong. What he has, he declares, is only for God’s chosen people..

We can well imagine why Joseph’s brothers were speechless and “dismayed at his presence’. Here was the one they had effectively murdered, standing in front of them and going on to say “do not be distressed or angry with yourselves...”. What might they have expected to hear from their brother’s mouth ? After what they had done . . .? Not this acceptance and not the promise to ‘provide for you and your household’ ... !

And think of the Canaanite woman, apparently a v different situation, she is the supplicant, experiences rejection on account of ethnicity, but she too behaves surprising and transformative.

I sometimes think the worst thing we have done as a church is to distort the challenge of the gospel and being a disciple, by being so restrictive, so bound up with rejection and judgment, that lots of people wanted nothing to do with it or us when they had the freedom to act for themselves; and then having lost the power we once had, we have become so “nice”, so bland, we have distorted the gospel in the opposite way, and people hardly know there is a pearl or blessing to be had. We, like the people in the stories, assume that life, and how God

thinks and acts, is based on judgment and rejection - which in fact reflects not God but how we think, based on all we know about being rejected, judged, avoided . . .not just personally, but also on account of things about ourselves that we have no power over, like which class or ethnic group we belong to. And we get drawn into thinking and acting in similar fashion, identifying with people “like us” and avoiding, judging people not “like us”. There are many forms of bias and prejudice but the most glaring and pervasive example of this is what we slowly learn to call racism . . .

You will know that there have been some dialogues and discussions organised by our Team following the Black Lives Matter protests and you may have seen some of the many tv programmes recently that have looked at different aspects of this. . . .The basis of the Christian support for these lie in today’s readings and especially the Gospel.

Jesus speaks as a man of his time and place when he claims “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel”. Or, as I have heard some church members say, “Charity begins at home” implying ‘that’s where it should end, too’. So, he explains what he *can’t* do, by saying: It’s not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs”. So she is a *dog* now . . .?! Can you hear the echoes of how white people have spoken of those who are different, or of how men sometimes treat women...? . And then we have one of the big transformative moments of the gospel - but it rarely gets highlighted in the way it should-how subversive is this of all forms of unjust control, but how encouraging for all who long for God’s kingdom... “even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master’s table”....imagine this moment . . . a woman, from the outside group, dares to question the teacher . . .! What will happen now . . .? There must, I feel, have been a pause. For the shock of this, and also because, when Jesus replies, he has changed: ““Woman (she is a person again) great is your faith. Let it be done for you as you wish’. And her daughter was healed instantly.”

Abundance and faith, blessings, go together - note that what the brothers might have expected from Joseph, his resentment, or desire for revenge, was not there. Similarly, the Canaanite woman, shows not the human response you might expect - resentment, or Complaint. Like the ‘soft answer that turns away wrath’, she makes her plea in a way that accepts Jesus’ words, and yet which points out something that is also true, ‘the dogs eat the crumbs that fall.’ Not resentment, then, but faith... Isn’t this what is often so shocking to our religious self, as Jesus put it elsewhere: the rain falls on the just and the unjust alike, the father of the wastrel, rejoices at his return.... This is the character of God that Jesus himself had to discover through the trusting challenge of this outsider, this ‘dog’ . . . this ‘woman’, whose ‘faith was great’.

