

Morningside

20-08-2017

Matthew 15: 21-28. Jesus and the Canaanite woman

It is one of the most difficult stories about Jesus: but it might just be one of the most interesting. It is the story of the healing of the daughter of a Canaanite woman. Healing stories are difficult, but this one has its special enigmas. The story goes like this. A foreign woman comes up to Jesus and asks for help: her daughter is tormented by mental illness. Jesus immediately ... ignores her! The disciples encourage Jesus to send her away, for she is making a nuisance of herself. Jesus tells them that he was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel: only to his own people. Again she comes after him "Lord, help me!" she cries. So how does Jesus respond to her? His reply takes some believing: he tells her that he does not think it is right to take the bread out of the mouths of children and give it to dogs! Still she presses her case, and comes back with a smart reply "Even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from the master's table". Jesus at last responds "Great is your faith" and her daughter was healed.

What on earth is happening here? Why is Jesus so unpleasant to this woman: harsh, even rude? Is he annoyed because his rest has been disturbed? Has he so exhausted his power by bringing good news to his own people that he has nothing left for this foreign woman? Can it be possible that she outsmarts him with a clever answer and so makes him do what he does not want to do? You see why I call it one of the most difficult stories about Jesus. Now let me tell you why I think it might be one of the most interesting. I suggest that in this story we have an exceptional, maybe unique, insight into who Jesus is: because in this story we see Jesus struggling with his prejudices. Struggling, and finally winning through.

The Bible says that Jesus was tempted like us in all things, but without sin. If he was fully human, as I believe, could that mean that he had prejudices, that he had learned prejudices? In the musical “South Pacific”, Lt Joe Cable sings a song about prejudice which was very controversial in 1949, and Rodgers and Hammerstein were under pressure to remove the song. He sings

*You've got to be taught to be afraid Of people whose eyes are oddly made,*

*And people whose skin is a diff'rent shade, You've got to be carefully taught.*

*You've got to be taught before it's too late, Before you are six or seven or eight,*

*To hate all the people your relatives hate, You've got to be carefully taught!*

Does it make sense to think that the human Jesus growing up in a human family, playing with human friends, was unconsciously absorbing the lessons the song suggests? Even when he was growing in his religion, could there have been dangerous lessons he was learning. If so, he was in that respect just like the rest of us.

In this special story we see Jesus meeting a woman. Could he have learned prejudices about women? What man has not? Not only a woman but a smart woman. Not only a smart woman but a foreign woman. Not only a smart foreign woman but a woman who wants him to confront mental illness. I think what we see in this story is Jesus and if I'm right it is one of the very few occasions, if not the only one, where we see Jesus when he does not know what to do. What person has there ever been – and Jesus was a real person – what person has there ever been who sometimes did not know what to do? As he stands in front of the Canaanite woman Jesus is struggling with the prejudices he has learned. Wrestling inside himself with the conflict between what he has been carefully taught and what he knows to be right. Struggling and

wrestling and facing up to the conflict within and reaching for God and the will of God and – at last – coming through. Heroically overcoming some of the stuff he has taken in and faithfully fulfilling the will of God. Faithfully discovering and fulfilling the will of God. It is nonsense to think that Jesus found it easy to obey God. When the Bible says he was tempted it means really tempted. Here he wins through; he wins through for God. And the girl is healed.

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Charlottesville, Virginia. Kait Dugan is a friend of Nicola Whyte, our last Pastoral Assistant here in Morningside, before Jennifer. Like Nicola, Kait is working on a Ph.D. in theology and she was in Charlottesville on the 12<sup>th</sup> of August, the day when it all happened. She was there to support her friend, a local minister, who was taking part in the silent protest organised by local clergy against the proposed rally. Here is how she described how it felt to stand with the local ministers. *While I stood on the corner, I also tried to dodge the many bottles full of feces that were thrown in the air from the Neo-Nazis. I tried to not breathe in the tear gas and the pepper spray clouds that kept coming my way. The Neo-Nazis just kept coming in groups over and over. Some screamed in the middle of the street as their eyes burned from the pepper spray. It was the most horrific scene I have ever seen in my life. I coughed so hard at one point from breathing in pepper spray that I wet myself. I could not stop coughing. It was terrifying.*

A day of horror. People came from all over America in support of Hitler, to demonstrate their hatred of Jewish people, of black people, of gay

people. Worst of all, the President's instinctive reaction was to say that there were faults on both sides. He actually said that the people like Nicola Whyte's friend Kait, who were protesting against racism, bigotry and hatred, shared the blame with the anti-semites and the white supremacists. Wrong, Mr President. Desperately, terrifyingly, irresponsibly wrong. When the world needed to hear a voice of decency from the United States, it heard it not from the White House, but from The Terminator himself: Arnold Schwarznegger said what needed to be said. *There are not two sides to bigotry, there are not two sides to hatred. If you choose to march with a flag that symbolizes the slaughter of millions of people, there are not two sides.*

Don't tell me that this is nothing to do with us. The world turned its eyes away when Fascism spread its poison in Germany and in Italy and in France in the 1930s; the world – and the churches- turned their eyes away and said "it's nothing to do with us". The cost to the whole world was tears and pain and death. None of us dare forget the death of six million Jews; and you of all people, Mr President, how can you forget the death of half a million American soldiers in the fight against Nazism? There is a poison, that same poison, alive in our world today. Ask any Jew in Scotland, ask any Muslim in Lancashire, ask any black person in London, and they will tell you that violent extremism, anti-semitism and racism are on the upsurge in our own dear country. This is no time for silence. The time is past - if it ever was - when a racist remark could be left unchallenged. This day we all have to renew our determination to overcome our own prejudices, just as Jesus had to do himself. There are not two sides to bigotry, there are not two sides to hatred.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was executed for his opposition to the anti-Semitism and racism of Hitler and the Nazis. Hear his words: *the sin of respectable people is the refusal to be socially and politically responsible.*