

Sermon

By Bill Pattinson

I'm not sure the saying, "May you live in interesting times" is indeed a Chinese curse. Perhaps it's just another example of unconscious racist bias. Yet no one can deny that "We live in interesting times." The Coronavirus pandemic arrived when Populist governments and beliefs were enjoying great support worldwide. Brexit, remember that, was high on our Government's agenda in the belief that the result of the 2016 referendum supported the cry, "We want our country back." The murder of George Floyd in America has highlighted the Black Lives Matter movement. We are being asked to re-examine our knowledge of the Slave Trade in the Empire's history and in this country's. Did you know that in the West Country during the 17th and 18th centuries there were slave ports in Bristol, Exeter, Plymouth and Bridport dealing with "black cattle."?

At the moment I'm reading the journalist Renni Eddo-Lodge's book "Why I'm no longer talking to White people about Race." She argues strongly that, due to the hegemony of culture, white people are unable to empathise with "people of colour" - and that's the term she prefers. Whether consciously or unconsciously, all white people are racists. Perhaps that's why Bishop Robert in his letter to clergy and ministers, dated 9th July, read it all in August's edition of New Leaves, announced that "from this autumn, in order to overcome racial stereotyping, unconscious bias training will be mandatory for every licensed clergy person and reader in the Diocese". It would appear that we are going to need a "faith that moves mountains" if we are to achieve racial justice, equality and inclusion in our society, in our Church and in God's Kingdom here on earth.

And why do I begin with this uncomfortable set of events and reports? Because this morning's Gospel speaks to us today primarily about two things - inclusion and faith. We could call today "Inclusion Sunday", as all the readings set for today repeatedly emphasise inclusion, to look beyond the expected, the stereotype; not to judge members of different groups, but to be non-judgemental. We hear the words of a Canaanite which lead to Jesus saying, "Woman, great is your faith!"

Jesus is once again seeking a place of quiet where he can find a little peace and an opportunity to pray. He's been very busy in the area around the Sea of Galilee, healing people who have flocked to him because of his reputation. He's been in dispute with the Pharisees and Scribes over some of their traditions. He seeks indeed a foreign holiday, going abroad to the district of Tyre and Sidon, near modern-day Lebanon. No peace, however. A Canaanite woman, who lives there, approaches Jesus shouting, "Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David, my daughter is tormented by a demon." Now this is where this passage becomes uncomfortable because Jesus does not answer her. The disciples, who are completely out of their comfort zone in this foreign land, taking his silence as an understanding that Jesus wants nothing to do with her, urges him to send her away. Here, in the disciples' understanding, is a Gentile descended from Israel's original enemies, the Canaanites. To exacerbate matters she is a woman, making her doubly marginal. How dare she shout at Jesus with such persistence. Who does she think she is? We could say the disciples, as well as showing no compassion, were revealing their prejudices and racist behaviour. Yet in response to the disciples' request Jesus answers, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." Does this mean that Jesus sees his mission as only for the Israelites, the Jews? Surely not!

The woman then comes and kneels at Jesus's feet and in her anguish, desperately pleads with him, "Lord, help me!" His answer appears unkind. "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." This seems to be rubbing dirt into the wound. "The children" are those from the house of Israel and "the dogs" is a pejorative term for Gentiles, non-Jews, outsiders. How can we view this humiliating reply? Some theologians believe Jesus is testing the woman's faith. Well, it's a cruel test. She has already referred to Jesus as "Lord, Son of David", recognising him as the

Messiah for whom the Jews have been waiting, which is more than many Jews had. However other theologians argue that Jesus is reflecting his humanity. He was a person of his time, a first century Jew born into a world of boundaries, discrimination and exclusion. It can be so easy to idealise him in an unrealistic way. Perhaps, like us, he had unconscious racial bias.

The Canaanite woman accepts the abusive term “dogs” and comes back at Jesus with the feisty reply, “Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master’s table.” She knows that Jesus’ redemption is not just for the children of Israel, but for all. Her reply reminds us of Jesus’ miracle of feeding the 5000 when twelve baskets of crumbs were collected after all had been fed. There is certainly enough to go round for all. What a woman – you have to admire her. Persistent, tenacious and with a faith that recognises Jesus for who he is, the Saviour of the whole world - everyone is included. She knows that Jesus can work miracles and cure her daughter. Jan Richardson, artist, writer and ordained minister interprets the Canaanite woman’s response to Jesus with these words:

*“I am saying
I know what you
can do with crumbs
and I am claiming mine,
every morsel and scrap
you have up your sleeve.
Unclench your hand,
your heart.
Let the scraps fall
like manna,
like mercy
for the life
of my child,
the life of
the world.
Don’t you tell me no”*

Here is the faith that moves mountains, an example to us all. Things might not always go as you expect with God - he can spring surprises, even knock you down. So Jesus can turn round to his disciples and say, “Look at this woman’s faith. Don’t pre-judge her. We can learn from outsiders, those on the margins of life. Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done as you wish.” He knew what he was doing, what he was saying.

There is a clear message here about the abundance of God’s mercy that transcends all racial boundaries and gender issues. The abundance of God’s riches cannot be contained or fenced in - there is more than enough to go round. “For my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples”, Isaiah writes in our first reading. Believe, have faith, all are welcome in God’s kingdom. All things are possible with God - yes, even racial justice and equality. As R.S Thomas says of the Kingdom:

*It’s a long way off, but to get
There takes no time and admission
Is free, if you purge yourself
of desire
And present yourself with
Your need only and the simple offering*

Of your faith, as green as a leaf.

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