

Reflection for the Tenth Sunday after Trinity (16.08.20)

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I laughed to myself yesterday, when I read a little extract from the newly published, 'Royalty Revealed', in the newspaper. Apparently, while Prince Philip and the Queen are devoted Sunday morning churchgoers, they dislike long-winded sermons. Prince Philip explains, 'The soul cannot absorb what the posterior cannot tolerate.' All I can say is that I hope you're sitting on a well-cushioned chair....

But let me cut to the chase, for the sake of your posteriors. It's a curious story, isn't it, this story from Matthew's Gospel? In fact, I've been pondering all week on the question of why Matthew includes it because, when you consider it carefully, it doesn't do Jesus or his disciples any favours.

The context is important, though. In both versions of this story (in Matthew's Gospel and in Mark's) Jesus has just been arguing about scriptural interpretation with the Pharisees and scribes, challenging their understanding of God, of the Law, and of Jesus's own authority. But, up until now, it has been very much a family fight, if you like - a debate concerning the people of Israel, a debate about God's promises for God's chosen people. And when Jesus leaves these discussions behind, travelling from Galilee to Tyre and Sidon, it's here that the Canaanite woman (an outsider) comes onto the scene, screaming and shouting on behalf of her sick daughter.

In a 21st century context, we might describe the behaviour of the disciples as 'virtue-signalling', a modern habit of indicating that one has virtue by expressing disgust or favour for certain political or cultural ideas. In spite of their commitment to Jesus and to his mission, they are scandalised by the Canaanite woman's behaviour, and tell him to send her away: treating her like a rude interruption. Which is rich, coming from them, when - not long before this - Jesus rebuked them for having little faith during a storm.

And, as for Jesus: well, there are many schools of thought as to what his comments might mean. The woman's words and actions render Jesus speechless. When he does eventually speak, it's to remind her that she's an outsider. And then, when she boldly kneels before him, imploring him to help, he compares her to a dog.

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Some would say this is simply a proverbial statement, hardly offensive at all. Others would say that Jesus provokes the woman deliberately in order to elicit a response of faith. But there's really no getting away from the fact that this is a pejorative term for a person from a different country. And, to quote someone else, 'In the culture of the time, and certainly in the location, it is neither cute nor funny to call someone a bitch.' (Padraig O Tuama, 'In the Shelter').

But this nameless woman takes Jesus's words and turns them around, with self-deprecating wisdom and insight. 'Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table.'

I'd say that this leads to one of the most important pregnant pauses in the Gospels. Maybe it's a bit implausible to think that Jesus's understanding of his task changes in a matter of moments. But maybe it's not. Maybe this is when Jesus realises that his mission is broader and deeper than he'd first imagined. Maybe this is when the human Jesus wrestles with God and comes to a fuller understanding of what's required of him. And after that pause, come words of blessing and honour. 'Woman,' he says, 'great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.' I'm not sure that any greater honour is accorded to anyone else in the stories we have about Jesus.

So why does Matthew include this story? Well, I can't help wondering whether it reveals something important about truth, and the way in which God reveals truth to us, in and through our lives. **In situations that are not of our choosing, we sometimes (though not always) stumble closer towards God.** Sometimes, in those situations - and depending on where we stand within them - we might be called to do something courageous. We might be called to be a little more open to the interruptive presence of the other. We might be called to change our mind about something that we once held dear. Even the Son of Man was prepared to do that.

It's hard not to think of all those young people who find themselves, this week and next, in situations not of their choosing, because of the outcome of that algorithm. Whatever the rights and wrongs of the system, it's heart-breaking for the young people left with disappointing results. Perhaps Plan B - an unwelcome interruption, a change of direction - might just lead somewhere new, unexpected and lifegiving, with a big dose of courage. It's hard, too, not to think about the 4000 migrants and refugees to the UK this year who've found themselves in situations not of their own choosing, making courageous life or death decisions that are about as far from being 'bad, stupid, dangerous or criminal' as you can get ('*Boris Johnson accused of scapegoating migrants over Channel comments*', The Guardian, Monday 10th August). Taking these two things together, who wouldn't want the best possible future for themselves and for their children?

Some of us will find it impossible to hear the Canaanite woman's words without recalling the words of a prayer we use in church sometimes, usually during our 8 o'clock Eucharist. It's the Prayer of Humble Access, and it's derived from this very story.

*We do not presume
to come to this your table,
merciful Lord,
trusting in our own righteousness,
but in your manifold and great mercies.
We are not worthy
so much as to gather up
the crumbs from under your table.
But you are the same Lord,
whose nature is always to have mercy...*

How I long to say that prayer again, in the not-too-distant future. I used to feel that it was a bit heavy handed - perpetuating the sense of inadequacy and shame that is barely concealed below the surface for most of us. But as I've got older (and, more questionably, wiser) I've come to love it, though I think that it would be better titled 'The Prayer of Profound Courage.' For it's the prayer of a people who know their need for God, and who are not afraid to wrestle with God and to claim God's promises of mercy and justice - even when it means walking along a different path and having our understanding of what God can do uprooted and expanded.

In whatever situations we face that are not of our choosing - and perhaps especially those where the longed-for healing doesn't come - may we have courage, may we be open to the other, and may we be ready to have our minds changed if necessary. And may we be equally sensitive to others who may be in the same metaphorical - or actual - boat.

Amen.