

TRINITY 10 *Proper 15 Year A*

Our scripture readings today are all about God moving in mysterious ways.

Joseph remember was Jacob's favourite son - the first born of his beloved Rachel, for whom he waited 14 years. Joseph's younger brother, Benjamin, was also Rachel's child. Joseph was 17 when he was sent to shepherd the flocks with his father's older sons. When his brothers saw him coming they plotted to throw him into a pit and pretend he'd been eaten by wild animals, but when some desert traders passed by, they decided to sell him as a slave to work in Egypt.

Years later when he had become the Pharaoh's most trusted adviser, on account of his ability to interpret dreams, Joseph is reunited with his brothers, who have travelled to Egypt in search for supplies in a time of terrible famine. Joseph said to his brothers '...do not be distressed, or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here...God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant of earth, and to keep alive for you many survivors. So it was not you who sent me here, But God.' After all the wrong that had been done to him by his brothers, Joseph cannot blame them or be angry with them. He kisses them and weeps so loudly the whole palace is filled with his cries. Joseph, the dreamer, is in no doubt that God was at work in all the anguish of his family relationships. But it is only after many years have passed that this truth is made clear.

Alongside the story of Joseph's reunion with the brothers who sold him into slavery in Egypt, we have the strange story of Jesus and the Canaanite, or Syro-Phoenician, woman who, like so many who appear in the gospels of Jesus, has no name. When she cries out to Jesus to heal her mentally ill daughter, he ignores her. His disciples urge him to send her away because she keeps shouting. When she kneels before Jesus asking him for help, his reply is shocking to our politically corrected ears: It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs. Biblical writers used the term Canaanite to describe all indigenous peoples living in the region, regardless of ethnic or political differences. It was generally used to mark ethnic boundaries between Israelites and indigenous peoples with whom intermarriage was forbidden.

We use similar labels today to lump together peoples with very different cultures: Black/Asian/Muslim/Jew...The bureaucratic acronym BAME (Black and Minority Ethnic) has become widely used as an even more divisive term which denies any distinction except white British.

‘People of colour’ may sound more poetic, but this term does not cover the racial abuse suffered by ethnic Caucasians – Romanians (Gypsies), Poles, Jews, Irish...When St Peter’s was asked to display a BLM banner on the church railings, some said, but surely all lives matter? But then we realised this is a slogan adopted by the American far right. The image chosen for display on the church notice board shows a bright child holding a placard that says: We said Black Lives Matter. We did not say Only Black Lives Matter. We know All Lives Matter. We just need your help with Black Lives Matter for Black Lives are in Danger. Let us all pray profoundly that the widely reported BLM protests around the world a few weeks ago will mark a turning point in how we all talk and act.

We all speak and act with unconscious bias – even Jesus did it. It had never occurred to Jesus, before this Syrophenician woman approached him to cure her daughter, that the gospel could potentially spread faith in God beyond the boundaries of the Jews. Biblical scholars have pointed out that his response to this woman would have been conditioned by traditional Jewish teaching about proselytizing, or having anything to do with, Gentiles. ‘Dogs’ was a label used for the sacred prostitutes of Canaanite fertility rites so abhorrent to the Hebrews in the OT Book of Deuteronomy (23.18–19). In another famous passage Jesus likens preaching to non-Jews to ‘throwing pearls before swine’.

The encounter between Jesus and the Syro-Phoenician woman marked a turning point in his mission. This narrative is the only one in all the gospels in which ‘the Messiah’ is outwitted – and, against all the odds, by a woman of non-Jewish heritage. The Canaanite woman has been taken as an icon for the BLM movement - another banner reads: Jesus Understood Justice More Deeply Because She Said Syro-Phoenician Lives matter.

In all the anguish in our relationships – in our families, in our nation, in our world, let us, like Joseph the dreamer, be thankful for opportunities for healing. And, inspired by the bravery and the perseverance of all those who speak out for unseen, ill-treated peoples, let us be attentive to opportunities to challenge and to change.

Let us pray:

Forgive us when we are passive or timid about those on the outside. Bless the quick-witted assertive woman in each of us who trembles even as she dares. Open our spirits to your strength. Infuse us with the power of your love. Lead us to the ones who need the healing balm of a loving community. Show us the door we are to knock on for their sake.

From Mary Zimmer *Guided Meditations from the Stories of Biblical Women*

