

Genesis 45. 1-15

Matthew 15. 7-28

In 2013 Chris and I spent about 11 weeks in Europe on LSL. It was a great holiday. We spent some of the time in Scotland digging up long-dead relatives of mine. We stayed a few nights in the area my great-grandfather came from and one morning visited an ancient, ruined abbey. It was first thing on a weekday morning and we were the only people in the ticket office/gift shop as a Scottish summer downpour began, so we stayed put and chatted with the caretaker, a local man about our age. He came from the local town and said that he hadn't always worked at this heritage site but had previously been a roof plumber. He said though, that when he got the job there, quite a number of his Protestant friends cut him off when he began to work at what they called "that catholic abbey". "That abbey" had been disestablished almost 500 years before by Henry VIII when he broke away from the church in Rome, formed the Church of England and made himself head of the church. The abbey had been slowly decomposing over 500 years, but the protestant locals still identified it as "that catholic abbey". We were gobsmacked by this centuries-deep hostility. This was clearly a place with a long memory. It was quite beyond our comprehension that such stark, long-drawn lines between one group and another could still exist after five centuries— enough to dissolve friendships. It made us recognise what cultural, social and religious freedom we enjoy in Australia.

Jesus has entered hostile territory. He has crossed the borders of Israel and has entered into Gentile land; a place populated by people, considered by religiously pure Jews of the time, to be unclean; untouchable; people a faithful, ritually pure Jew should not associate with. And into the street comes a woman, not sneaking up behind Jesus to touch the hem of his robe, not just trying to attract his attention but shouting; a Canaanite woman; a harpy, a harridan. This is a woman who doesn't know her place because she addresses a man in public. And Jesus ignores her. Pointedly ignores her.

You may recall from your Sunday school days that when the Hebrew slaves – the descendants of Jacob - who were fleeing oppression in Egypt, arrived at the promised land they were given the command – so the scripture tells us - to drive out the local tribes; the Amorites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, , the Hivites, the Jebusites; and the Canaanites. They did so in varying degrees of commitment – not completely eradicating them and intermarrying with many. But it was king David who, some centuries later, finally ethnically cleansed Israel of the Canaanites, driving them out. It's a scriptural history so many of us find obnoxious; and tragically still at play in the modern state of Israel.

From Chris and my experience in Scotland, I suddenly saw how it is that many people maintain centuries-deep animosities to others who have slighted them, oppressed them, sought to wipe them out. So as this Canaanite woman shouts at Jesus, it's not clear whether this title Son of David is a title of praise and respect, or a reminder that Jesus' ancestors were the people who treated her ancestors in unspeakably cruel ways. "Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David."

What we do know is that Matthew portrays her as a person of faith; great faith. *Let it be done for you as you wish.* In her plight faith enables her to cross over boundaries; boundaries which her

own Canaanite history and Jesus' Jewish religious exclusions have marked out us insurmountable.

She has leapt the boundary. Jesus yet can't. *'I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.'* He says to her. But she persists. And so Jesus insults her: *It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs.'* But as she persists Jesus seems to recognise that out of his own mouth have come evil intentions; words that betray what is in his own heart. As he has just said to the crowd about the scribes and pharisees' hypocrisy: *For out of the heart come evil intentions, murder, adultery, fornication, theft, false witness, slander.* Suddenly Jesus relents; indeed, he repents; turns around.

I am interested in the pattern of forgiveness in two figures today and in what we have read in recent weeks. What we have seen is people who have been betrayed, treated terribly cruelly, and who could seem entitled to bear a grudge; and to shape their own life and that of all those around them with their sense of betrayal and victimhood; but who have left these feelings behind.

Joseph; scorned, betrayed, abandoned by his brothers and sold into slavery. As the second most powerful man in Egypt he had the power to do anything he liked to his brothers as he meets them again years later. He could satisfy a sense of betrayal that he may have carried deep in his vitals all this time. But he breaks down and sobs out of love for his brothers, longing for reunion with his father.

And the Canaanite woman could, and maybe at one level does, scorn Jesus and the legacy of ethnic cruelty he represents, but her own desperation and faith propels her to transcend centuries-deep animosities; because she recognises in Jesus the one who can save.

And from a couple of weeks ago from our reading of the saga of Issaac and Rachel and their twin sons Esau and Jacob we read of Jacob returning to the land of his father and the meeting with his twin-brother Esau; Esau, who he had betrayed twenty years before. Jacob is paralysed by his guilt, in fear of his life, expecting that Esau had been holding a grudge all these years and would seek to kill him.

Yet these three: Esau, Joseph and the Canaanite woman have all transcended the possibility of bitterness and retribution to seek reconciliation and wholeness.

The Gospel of Matthew is a gospel which has a very Jewish perspective; one which repeatedly portrays Jesus as the one who fulfills the law and whose story echoes the longings of the Hebrew scriptures. You may recall from the birth narratives of Jesus the frequent phrase: *this took place to fulfil what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet.*

We are in the gospel of Matthew and you may recall at the end of his gospel, where Jesus gathers the disciples on a mountain top and sends them: *Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.* This moment with the Canaanite woman in what was considered by Jews to be the unclean Gentile district of Tyre and Sidon is maybe a pivotal moment in the unfolding Matthew's gospel where boundaries of exclusivity, notions of purity are broken down and the embrace of God is to be set loose in the world.

Chris and my experience in the gift shop that wet summer's morning in Ayrshire, gave us a window into the centuries-deep animosities that one group can hold for another. Maybe the great gift of life in Australia is that so many waves of migrants who have come to Australia over its history have been fleeing the cruel impact of these kinds of animosities to make a new life. People fleeing systems of oppression; fleeing social, religious, cultural systems whereby one group labels another group as unclean, as racially impure, as un-something – a label, a designation to tag a group as expendable. From the British convicts who formed the first colony here, the Irish fleeing the injustice of the potato famine, those Scots displaced by the highland clearances, Jews fleeing escalating pre-WWII persecution and those who fled the memory of the Holocaust; to those in our own time coming by boat from the middle east, fleeing war and oppression.

As I explored last week, these are all groups which have been subject to systemic victimisation. And, of course, this year, as we are invited to consider a change to our constitution, we are being invited to open the door to reconciliation. In many ways the aboriginal people of Australia have been like Esau toward Jacob; like Joseph toward his brothers – that they have not held a grudge, they have not and they do not seek retribution but are reaching out in reconciliation to us. Maybe as Jacob is toward Esau and like Joseph's brothers, we carry a deep sense of guilt about the injustice, the betrayal from which we have benefited; and are fearful. But as the Statement from the Heart says to the whole nation: *We invite you to walk with us in a movement of the Australian people for a better future.*

In the letter to the Ephesians the writer gives expression to the new way which Jesus has opened to the world;

*But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off (from each other we might read) have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us. He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, so that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it.\* So he came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near; for through him both of us have access in one Spirit to the Father.*

This is our inheritance as people of Christ, that the barriers which we might be told should separate us from others are barriers we can leap over and can meet and embrace others, seeking the peace of God for a humanity deeply in need of peace. So, may the spirit give us courage, desperation, love - to be agents of the peace of Christ, being his people in our own time and place.

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