

TRINITY 13 2008 A

I first met today's Gospel a long time ago in a children's story by C. S. Lewis, part of his famous Chronicles of Narnia.

Reepicheep, the bravest mouse of all Narnia, loses his tail in a battle. As he bows to Aslan, the Great Lion, the King of Narnia, he realizes the terrifying absence of something important... his tail!

"I am confounded," says Reepicheep to Aslan. "I am completely out of countenance. I must crave your indulgence for appearing in this unseemly fashion."

"...What do you want with a tail?" asks Aslan.

"Sir," says the Mouse, "I can eat and sleep and die for my King without one. But a tail is the honour and glory of a Mouse."

"I have sometimes wondered, friend," says Aslan, "Whether you do not think too much about your honour."

"Highest of all High Kings," says Reepicheep, "permit me to remind you that a very small size has been bestowed on us Mice, and if we did not guard our dignity, some (who weigh worth by inches) would allow themselves very unsuitable pleasantries at our expense."

Aslan looks around at the other mice...

"Why have all your followers drawn their swords, may I ask?" says Aslan.

"May it please your High Majesty, " says the second Mouse, whose name is Peepiceek, "we are all waiting to cut off our own tails if our Chief must go without his. We will not bear the shame of wearing an honour which is denied to the High Mouse."

"Ah!" roars Aslan, "you have conquered me. Reepicheep, for the love that is between you and your people, you shall have your tail again."

Jesus seems to be distressingly unkind to the Canaanite woman in today's gospel reading from Matthew. Our informed, tolerant, accepting selves curl up at the edges when Jesus seems to put the woman in her place, the proper sociably acceptable non-place a gentile woman would have in Jewish society.

Textually, the nuances in the Greek version are even starker than those of the best English translations... in terms of text alone, this is cutting stuff from the mouth of the Saviour of the world. Matthew doesn't even give her the dignity of having a name. Jesus refers to her as a dog, the extremely rude often used Jewish title for a gentile. In so using the term Jesus colludes with a society which makes her the most unclean, unworthy individual imaginable. Moreover, she is not only a gentile, but (God-forbid) a gentile woman. She has no authority, no social standing, no property, no status at all. Even Reepicheep the mouse without a tail has much greater standing in Narnia than the Canaanite woman has in ancient Palestine.

She should count herself lucky Jesus pays any attention at all, albeit none too flattering attention. The Pharisees would have had absolutely no time for such a bold woman. Any sensible teacher would have taken great offense at her audacity. The disciples too find her cries at the very least irritating.

Finally, Jesus is forced to turn to her and seems to draw the line. We've all done it. We don't have the time. There is too much at stake, too much to do. Our lives are crazy enough. We can't get involved. Our words come out as stark unfair, unfeeling and sometimes down-right cruel.

But then in her pithy little statement about dogs and tables and crumbs, the gentile woman makes her

refreshing claim to grace. She even embraces Jesus' metaphorical language: something the disciples can never quite seem to manage. It's all so bold, so insightful, so generous in the face of adversity, and, to Jesus' ears, so terribly beautiful. Immediately, this Canaanite woman, this outsider, stands head-and-shoulders above the crowd, and even the disciples must cower in her shadow.

Jesus is thunderstruck. She actually gets it. No matter how tiny she is from the Jewish point-of-view, she is willing to struggle faithfully -- even with God. She has assumed her rightful position in the Kingdom. She is among the first drops from the waterfall of Gentiles who are to be welcomed into Christ's loving arms.

The distance travelled in terms of justice restored, from absolutely nowhere to an 'everywhere' needs to be clearly seen in this accurate stark literal reading: the distance travelled in six lines of text is absolutely enormous.

So as in Narnia, as in Palestine, as in Leicester, as in the modern world, today's Gospel is about our struggles for justice, righteousness, and a dignity which is in part worked out face to face with God. It is about an insistent, one might say an almost obnoxious faith that will continue to pursue truth even at the expense of all cultural and societal boundaries. It is about our wrestling directly with a God "in whom we move and have our being" for our healing. And, brothers and sisters, it is about a God whose heart we can move and whose head we can turn.

The quest for women to be ordained as Bishops is a quest which in part is one of justice where all may stand together as equal recipients of the grace of God and equally capable of being empowered to serve and to lead to love and to be loved. This is a theology which sits very firmly as part of a pre-creation ordinance needing to be restored after centuries of misunderstanding, of misuse and of cruel consequences; an ordinance, I have to say, which has been long ignored throughout salvation history.

This Canaanite woman appeals to something quite timeless, boundless, and outside of her own understanding, which strikes at the centre of the being of God himself rooted before the world was formed, a striking at centuries of cultural misunderstanding of the nature of God...it seems to me that the Church for two thousand years has prolonged within its tradition that which God would disown, and ardently wishes to heal.

So, let us take seriously the faith of the Canaanite woman: a faith which may stand head-and-shoulders above our own, and which is capable of surprising the divine consciousness. Let us, with her, stand outside the accepted injustices which are easier to cope with than is rocking the boat, but are as unfaithful as they are easier.

Let us ask the hard questions and with her subtlety and gentleness cut through the dross of theological selectivity, and stand up for the wholeness and healing which is at the centre of the story. It is no accident that this gospel debate is immediately followed by the gentile daughter's actual healing! Then let us fervently pray that our Saviour might satisfy our thirst for justice, righteousness.

However, I end with a word of warning. In my experience there are those who feel that far from righting a long wrong, the ordination of women as bishops is yet another sign of the traditional balance of humanity being turned on its head... and is simply not of God.

There are also those who feel so empowered in this quest that there is a temptation to push so hard that the balance is tipped the other way. I fell out with a former colleague of mine at a Diocesan meeting in terms of her stance, on what she with others called 'positive discrimination' as a thing to be wholeheartedly grasped. Despite her knowing me very well, she suggested I would say that because I was a man! There were many who leapt to my defence! My immediate in your face comment was to suggest that such a stance was as bad as what we

were trying to heal! (Both of these stances in terms of a theology of justice I could not embrace.)

Our healing itself as a Church needs to be just, of good news, and of a prophetic nature to the society in which we find ourselves called to serve, as laypeople, priests and even bishops!

AMEN

Canon Stephen Foster  
17/8/08