

ST AIDAN'S UNITING CHURCH

SUNDAY 13 SEPTEMBER 2009

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Mark 8: 27-38

"Was Jesus influenced by his Culture?"

"If any want to follow after me, let them renounce themselves and take up their cross and follow me"

1. Was Jesus above culture or embedded in it and learnt to be inclusive?

Last week we engaged in an interactive witness to explore the meaning of the Syrophoenician woman's meeting with Jesus. We looked at our text along with the story in the movie, *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner*.

As a Syrophoenician, this woman belonged to a culture that had been an enemy of the Jews as much as the Romans. So, for this woman to enter a Jewish house that Jesus was visiting was totally inappropriate. Jesus was culturally correct to reply to her in the way he did because her social and religious place within Jewish society was rigidly set as an outsider. Even more, it was set amongst the dogs, making her a very undesirable outcast.

Yet, Jesus' silence and initial refusal, in the version we have in Matthew 15. 21-28, to show compassion to a distressed and needy non-Jewish woman is shocking and confusing to us. Jesus had healed other outsiders, but they were Jewish outsiders.

Now, our co-host from last week's interactive service, Charles Su, left me with a challenging question, and I said I would give my reply today.

In my words, I think Charles was asking me whether, 1. Jesus was actually inclusive yet pretended to be exclusively Jewish, or 2., whether Jesus was really embedded in his culture and therefore had to enter a learning process to change and become inclusive.

The answer is not simple. We have to realise that at times the Gospel writers were interested to reflect the historical Jesus, and at other times read the risen Christ into stories, making him above culture and knowing everything. At other times, stories blend the historical Jesus and the Christ of Faith. John's Gospel has Jesus testing people as a divine being who knows everything.

Yet, I will give my view on this matter, and then develop my answer in conversation with our text for today, Mark 8.34, and with the insights of discourse analysis.

2. The historical Jesus was embedded in the Jewish culture and learnt inclusiveness

My view is that the historical Jesus was a human being like all of us. And that every human being starts their human life embedded in their family and culture of origin. Humans beings are shaped by the discourse of their context.

The historical Jesus was embedded in his Jewish context as much as anyone. In Jesus' time,

dominant discourses were created by people with sanctioned authority over a number of centuries which set out the roles of men, women, children, outsiders and foreigners. Rabbi Eliezer, an ancient Jewish writer, continued the negative discourse created about Gentiles, when he said: "He who eats with a Gentile is like unto one who eats with a dog."

Jesus too had to struggle with his socially constructed world, with the rigid identities of gender, race, class, and religion. He had work through the exclusiveness of Jewish faith.

We know that Matthew and Mark's communities were still struggled with their socially constructed world, 40 years after Jesus death. Challenges such as: What place do Gentiles have? What power does Jewish discourse have?

We know that the early Christian communities were deeply divided over how much the Jewish faith should influence their newly found faith in the risen Christ. Exclusiveness still plagued their practice: Peter was criticised by Jewish Christian leaders for eating with Gentiles (Acts 11).

So this story about the Syrophoenician woman was really important for the Matthew and Mark, and I suggest more so about how the historical Jesus dealt with such complexity. It reminded the early church that it was an inclusive community, and that it had to break through its cultural boundaries into new forms of life.

In my view, Jesus was an example of such crosscultural learning and change.

3. The dying and rising of/in culture transforming itself as it addresses exclusions and power imbalances

Here we must realise that this story was related to our text in Mark 8: 34:

"If any want to follow after me, let them renounce themselves and take up their cross and follow me".

If we relate this text to the Syrophoenician story, we can ask, who had to renounce what? What did this invitation to take up the cross mean in this story?

Joanna Dewey emphatically states that this invitation is not a glorification of suffering, or an encouragement to become a victim! She goes on to say,

"This verse has been used to influence women to believe suffering is pleasing to God and to: Deny oneself, sacrifice oneself, wipe out a sense of self, and to chose suffering (embracing the cross)."

Joanna Dewey, "Let them renounce themselves and take up their cross": a feminist reading of Mark 8:34 in Mark's social and narrative world. Biblical Theology Bulletin. Fall, 2004

Our story is a crucifixion and resurrection story. But with a twist! The whole structure which treats people as less than human had to be re-ordered. New life, resurrection, would only emerge in and through a reorganisation of culture. For this to happen, there had to be crucifixion. The death of the old order of things! And the resurrection of societies, new life out of former constructions, is regularly required. And this is possible. Change is always possible if we realise how society is created

and recreated.

Discourse analysis has enabled us to see how we are produced, shaped and how we can reproduce, resist and reshape ourselves and our society.

It suggests: that various discourses structure our sense of reality and our idea about our identity; that our ways of thinking and behaving is produced by certain ideas, concepts, values, roles about our race, class, gender, sexuality and so on.

When we first meet the Syrophoenician woman in our story, she is not a human being as far as Jewish society is concerned. She is situated by certain dominant Jewish discourse of that ancient time with dogs. Such was her meaning and identity.

This constructed cultural knowledge was a truth that had the power to contain her view of herself, in mind and heart, and direct her behaviour. She refused to comply. She breaks the rules of truth, power and knowledge and approaches Jesus directly, cleverly disagreeing with him and claiming her rights for her daughter.

Rex Hunt, from the Uniting Church in Curtin, Canberra, Australia, suggests three threads in Mark 8: 34. The cross is about Jesus' integrity; God's 'love' is not about supernatural payment or rescue from sin, but divine sharing in human suffering; Jesus did not invite the cross, but accepted it rather than abandon his vision as an offering or glimpse of what the world is really like when you look at it with God's 'eyes'.

4. Conclusion

Val Urie, a member of our congregation, shared a story, about a change taking time, last week, and who has given permission to share it again here today. Val shared that when her daughter married a person of colour, some time ago, her mother found it really difficult to accept this racially different person. Yet, over the years she became reconciled to him and grew fond of him. This is an example of the dying of old attitudes and the rising of new understanding and relationship.

To close, a poem suggesting how we can express the carrying of the cross, written by Fr Ernie Smith, a priest working the streets in St Kilda:

Where is my cross?

Lord, you have asked me to carry the cross every day.
That's all right, but my question is, 'where do I find it?'
After all, for most of us, there is a fairly ordinary
routine to our daily life:
nothing extraordinary,
no big trauma,
no cause for suffering - so where is the cross?

Wait a minute, Lord.
Perhaps I find my cross for today
in the cross carried by others.

Perhaps I need to be like Simon of Cyrene;

After all, that cross wasn't his cross,
it wasn't intended for him,
he didn't even offer to help...
But it became his cross.

Laurelle is sixteen years old.
She is addicted to drugs.
Her life is caught up in prostitution.
Sixteen years old!

On hearing these words I am hurt.
I knew she was young -
I always knew that -
and there are others just as young,
but tonight it makes me feel sick.

I can't take away her cross.
But I can walk with her,
help to carry her cross -
and it becomes my cross.

So, Lord, help me keep my eyes open
and my heart hurting,
so that I can take up my cross,
every day.
And follow you.