

20 August 2017

Matthew 15:10-28 much of this content from Elaine Wainwright. I wonder if you've read Sally Morgan's book, 'My Place'? I recently listened to it again. In it, Sally tells the true story of her family coming to own their aboriginality and relationship to their land. As Sally's grandmother, Nan is dying, we hear the incredible residue of pain from her journey. She asks Sally to rub her back and as she does so Nan says:

'Ooh, that's good, Sally,' As Sally continued to rub, she let out a deep sigh and then said slowly,

"You know, Sal ... all my life, I been treated rotten, real rotten. Nobody's cared if I've looked pretty. I been treated like a beast. Just like a beast of the field. And now, here I am ...old. Just a dirty old blackfella."

Nan's experience I think, connects with today's story of the Canaanite woman from Matthew's gospel. Both women are marginalised and left to feel like outsiders,¹ The Canaanite woman I'm sure would have resonated with Nan's experience, but, she is desperate and seeks healing from Jesus for her daughter.

As her story is told, the Jesus of Mathew's gospel places a number of obstacles before the Canaanite woman, finally citing the proverbial saying—its not fair to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs [Matt 15:25] [words similar to those which Nan must have heard to have brought her to feel like a "beast of the field"]. Jesus claimed he is only there for Israel, so, the outsider, the Canaanite woman, appropriates to herself the status of 'dog' as Nan had appropriated the treatment from white Australia which had make her feel like a 'beast'.

As if shocked by this, the Matthean Jesus sets aside the obstacles he has constructed and heals her daughter. While we hear Nan's own voice through her granddaughter Sally, the Canaanite woman's voice is constructed by the Matthean storyteller who sets her story in the context of the ancient Canaanite/Israelite struggle. Jesus whose birth and life story generally placed him among the colonised

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of the Roman empire, preaching a message that was counter-Imperial, is here placed in this story in the role of the coloniser.

He stands with and for ancient Israel and evokes another conquest of land, namely ancient Israel's violent appropriation of the land of the Canaanites on the grounds of its being promised as divine gift.

This is a story which has been used to support many land grabs especially among Christians informed not only by the stories of ancient Israel but by a story such as the encounter between Jesus and the Canaanite woman. And yes, it is not surprising to learn that it has been used in white European appropriation of indigenous Australian lands.²

Both Nan's story and the story of the Canaanite woman's encounter with Jesus, take our spirit to an encounter with the experience of the other, enabling us to allow space to see the the sacredness of the story of the other. These stories accompany us on our journey now.

Here is my imagining of the Canaanite woman's story, some narrative theology, if you like, informed by my reflection, and commentaries,

I give voice to The Canaanite woman:

“No doubt you look down on me, turn your nose up at me, an indigenous woman of this land, a despised Canaanite. This land that you took, claiming divine command for genocide, you were told to kill us all but you didn't, and some of us survive, battered, despised, downtrodden but living still all these years later, and here you are, a Jew, in my land looking like a coloniser, when I need help.

I know you can help. My daughter needs your help. So here I am, strong, a survivor, witty and intelligent, as you will discover. I will get what I want.

Your silence does not disturb me, so I cry out in your temple language,

² Professor Elaine Mary Wainwright, Head of School of Theology, University of Auckland, New Zealand
http://dlibrary.acu.edu.au/research/theology/elaine_wainwright.htm

"Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon."

But you, you remain silent, and your friends want to throw me out. Sure, I am an uncomfortable presence, unclean to you, not respectable, no husband, no father, no son to vouch for me.. better to get rid of me than engage.

"Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us."

He answered, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel."

He's a bit of an embarrassment to you now, this Jesus, isn't he, an embarrassment to you who come later, with your more liberal views, or maybe you rationalise, and excuse... But this is what he said none the less. That was his understanding, til then!

I came and knelt before him then, saying, "Lord, help me."

He looked. He saw. He engaged then, when I crawled, like a dog, grabbing hold of his feet, submissive, defiant, pleading.. defiling him, who talked of the harmlessness of food, and the power of the words that come from our mouths, me, the other, excluded from his help..

"It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." he said.

"Dogs", he said, "Did you hear that?" "Dogs", He insulted me, called me a prostitute, a whore, as good as. Two can play at this game. I do believe he disdains me, and is trying desperately to maintain his honour as a honourable Jewish man.

He wants me to leave, but I won't. He thinks his reputation is in grave danger! He's right.

I pick up on his agitation, and then calm him down using gentle words. I answer Jesus from my own culture.

"We have our own proverb too", I say, "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table." To you Jews, dogs are unclean, but for us, they are part of the family.

He seems shocked. My doggedness pays off.

"Woman," he says, (better than 'dog', I suppose,) great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish."

And my daughter was healed instantly.

What do I do now, make a bow, exit stage left? After all, I am only a backdrop to the story, yet, I believe I changed his mind, showed him

something. Spoke, dare I say it, spoke the gospel to him. Call me a heretic if you like, but my daughter is healed, and neither that Jewish man, Jesus, nor I, are the same, though you probably still don't even know my name.

Jesus world opened up that day. Jesus had his boundaries broken. Well and truly! The gospel opened up for him.

Jesus doesn't control the gospel.

Matthew doesn't control the gospel. The end of the gospel is in the community that continues to tell the story – the end of the gospel is in us.

'The story illustrates the new inclusiveness of the gospel. Faced with human need, Jesus is persuaded that people matter most. No one can be excluded. All must be given food. None can be treated like dogs. The story celebrates this reality.

As I go to Alice Springs each year, I know we need to keep listening and getting to know the stories of those who were here before we arrived.

We need to listen and build relationships.

The same could be said of other people within our church, who experience prejudice and exclusion... like people who are same sex attracted.. people of colour, people who live with disability...

There are many 'dogs' in our community who know what it is like to be shut out, told to wait, given second best. Calling them cute puppies or 'the blessed poor' does not address the issue, as long as they are treated like dogs. They have been treated as dogs so much so that it has become natural to treat them that way and to ignore their plight and our often naive prejudice - until the Canaanite woman gives them a voice. Jesus listened to that voice.

Those voices are still to be heard, for those with ears to hear.'³

Susanna

³ 2William Loader in: <http://wwwstaff.murdoch.edu.au/~loader/MkPentecost15.html>