

Pentecost 11 2017

There's a nasty little ditty that speaks to the casual embedded antisemitism of much of the 20th and 21st centuries. It's this – 'How odd of God to choose the Jews'. Like much casual racism it's meant to be funny while containing a barbed and cruel dismissal of a people. It did, however, receive a rebuttal that goes like this: 'But not so odd as those who choose a Jewish God yet spurn the Jews.' How is it that, over so many centuries, Christians have chosen a Jewish God and yet shown such hatred and violence towards our Jewish sisters and brothers?

A lot of this comes down to bad theology. In fact this bad theology even has a name – supersessionism (try saying that three times quickly!). It comes from the same root as supersede and has the same sort of meaning of an improved replacement. In theological terms it means the belief that the Church has replaced the Jewish race as God's chosen people. It has allowed Christians over the centuries to despise Jews as a people who failed God, who did not live up to God's special calling, who have been left behind in the story of God's interactions with the world.

We got it so wrong! In the early days of Christianity we were so busy competing with Judaism for followers that we set up a pointless, cruel hostility that lasted down the centuries. If we had paid closer attention to today's scriptures we might not have strayed so far from the path. Listen to Isaiah: 'Thus says the Lord God, who gathers the outcasts of Israel, I will gather others to them besides those already gathered.' Those already gathered – the Jews – are to be joined by those outside the first covenant – us gentiles, not to be replaced by them. Listen to Paul: 'I ask then, has God rejected his people? By no means!' and again 'the gifts and calling of God are irrevocable.' The Jews are God's called and covenanted people then and now and always.

This is how I understand the two callings of Judaism and the Church. The Jewish people were called out from among their neighbours to be entrusted with a new understanding of God. God as the one creator. God as the author of justice and righteousness calling for right action as much as for right worship. God as the one in dialogue with his people prodding them towards new insights and new responsibilities. These are all things contemporary Judaism still witnesses to as it calls all of us to work for the Hebrew concept of tikkun olam - the healing of the world.

This new understanding of the Jewish people prepared the place where Jesus could come and could be heard. Jesus brought to fulfilment the message of the prophets – that God’s covenant promises were to be for all people. That the whole world was called into relationship with the God of the Jewish people. That we are all her beloved children – Jews and gentiles – that we are all called to responsibility for God’s world. Not in competition but alongside, faith siblings, holding our own candles of divine light to illuminate one another.

And this was a message that Jesus himself had to learn before he was able to embody and proclaim it. Our gospel told us the story of one of the turning points in his understanding. The confrontation with a foreign woman who brings courage, intellect and wit to her encounter with Jesus. This woman who would not be put off by Jesus’ casually racist dismissal but held her ground and asserted her worth. This unnamed hero of the faith opened our beloved saviour’s eyes to the limitations of his love, opened our beloved saviour’s heart to the world outside his borders.

Jesus, the one who was fully human as well as fully God, had to confront his own tribal loyalty so that he could grow beyond it. I remember painfully the moment when I realized my own tribal – racist – views that had been hidden from me till that point. It was when I was 20 and staying in a parish in a non-touristy part of Barbados. For the first time my white skin was the minority colour around me. For the first time black was normal. And it hit me then how my culture had taught me to fear black skin. To see black boys and men as a greater threat than white boys and men. To identify black with crime and violence and riot. Consciously – even then I was a liberal inclusive Christian - consciously I rejected these views. Consciously I thought I was colour-blind or race-neutral – and thought that was a good thing! And it was only then, only in that new environment, that I began to know the subconscious prejudices that were subtly poisoning my view of the world.

Our gospel tells us a bit about those hidden horrid parts of the human psyche. Of the evil that can live in our hearts and defile us. That it is not what we take in from the world that pollutes us but what we bring to the world of our own self-centred viewpoint and behaviour. And we have seen terribly in these last days the violent consequences of these poisonous and abhorrent worldviews. Of an assumption of superiority which sees the other as less than human. Of a continuing denigration of Jews and of blacks. Of racism and antisemitism at its ugliest and most obvious.

And it's going to take more than one feisty Canaanite woman asserting their humanity to address this defilement in our midst. It's going to take more than correcting a theological mistake that has infected the church for hundreds of years. It's going to take all of us white members of the church addressing both our privilege and our prejudices. Let's be quite clear – racism in America is not a black problem and antisemitism is not a Jewish problem – they are a white problem. Yes, other races can be racist too, but they don't share the privilege and power that belong to white america. And let's also be quite clear – racism and antisemitism are not just a southern problem, they may be more muted and hidden but they are here in liberal old San Francisco too.

One thing that gives me hope is knowing that Jesus walked this same path before us. It may seem shocking at first to hear him being so dismissive of the Canaanite woman and her daughter. But this story helps turn my shame at my own prejudices into resolve to follow Jesus into open-hearted inclusivity. It reminds me that the Spirit of God is always at work, in every human life, even in the holiest of human lives, even in the ugliest of human lives, at work tugging us towards love and peace and away from bigotry and violence.

Dear Grace Cathedral, dear Church of God, it is beyond time that we step up to address all that defiles us and our society. It is beyond time that we renounce all ideas of superseding Judaism and instead embrace those who hold to God's first unbreakable covenant. It is beyond time that we follow Jesus in seeing all the ways that our love may be limited and let God's Spirit break open our hearts to make room for all people. It is beyond time that those of us who are white members of the Church accept the responsibility for change that comes with the privilege of colour.

If not now, when? If not us, who? Let the Spirit of God break us open as the bread will be broken at this table. Let the Spirit of God feed us with the very life of Christ. Let the Spirit of God send us in to the world as agents of love and change. If not now, when? If not us, who?