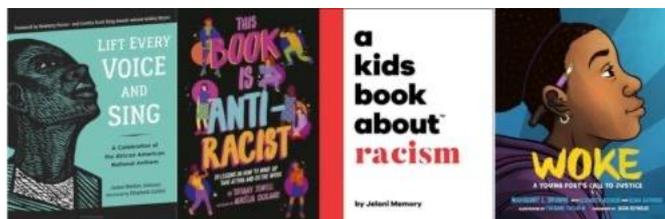


Pentecost 11

Isaiah 56: 1, 6-8; Psalm 67 Romans 11:1-2a, 29-32, Matt 15:10-20, 21-28

A question: 'Was Jesus a racist?'



In the light of our biblical text in our gospel this morning concerning the Canaanite women, what would you say?

*[Jesus] did not answer her at all. And his disciples came and urged him, saying, 'Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us.'*²⁴ He answered, 'I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.'¹

However, it would appear that we could lay this accusation at the feet of Jesus and His disciples! Being 'exclusive' is a very human issue. We like people to be like us. But if we are not faced with difference; be it opinion, creed or race, then we can be unaware of the beauty in the other. I heard a story once about a birthday party where the mother had made her child a wonderful birthday cake. After dinner, the mother cut the cake and let out a sigh: if only her child's little friends had been invited... The father then went into a rage. The child wonders "*What have I done wrong?*". The mother assures the child has done nothing wrong. "*It's just that your father doesn't like strangers. He only likes his own*". It would appear that Jesus too only likes His own because He says , "*I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.*"²

This opinion is sadly very much apparent in our society and in the world today. The demonstrations about the dreadful death of George Floyd, in America, have brought these opinions very much to the fore and have been the catalyst for demonstrations and much soul searching in many countries, including our own. The *Black Lives Matter* movement has brought many such injustices to our attention. Currently there is the MP Dawn Butler, an MP of colour who was recently stopped by the Police³; a play entitled *Typical* by Ryan Calais Cameron about the true story of a black Falklands war veteran who died handcuffed to the floor in a British

¹ Matt 15: 23, 24

² Matt 15: 23, 24

³ Guardian 13th August 2020

Police cell⁴ and a story entitled *Skin Deep*⁵ about a black medical student who was trained to treat white people only. You may also have heard that our dermatologists (according to a programme on BBCR4) find it difficult to diagnose skin cancer on people of colour. I wonder if you have experienced opinions similar to the father in the story about the birthday cake?

What does the Bible say about such matters?

Matthew, in this morning's gospel, is using the story of the Canaanite Woman to show the Jews that God's plan of Salvation, is for the Gentiles too. In Isaiah (2: 2-4) there is a pre-exilic vision of the Gentiles streaming to the Temple Mount at Jerusalem in procession. This is a theme that we see in second Isaiah where Israel's vocation is to be a "light to the nations"⁶. God will bring foreigners to His holy mountain (56:7); and the nations shall come to Israel's light (60:2). These texts are not just restricted to Isaiah. In Zechariah 8: 23 we read: *Thus says the Lord of hosts: In those days ten men from nations of every language shall take hold of a Jew, grasping his garment and saying, 'Let us go with you, for we have heard that God is with you.'* This is the text that Matthew is referring back to in our gospel story. If we were good Jews we would recognise this.



For the Matthean Community the relations between Jews and Gentiles was a very sensitive topic. Some were born Jews and others Gentiles though both were united in Faith in Jesus Christ – like the Canaanite Woman. The conversation between Jesus and the Canaanite Woman (Matt 15: 21-28) is to show that Jews and Gentiles could exist together in the same Christian community. (She was the lady who changed Jesus' mind.) Matthew preserves the salvation-historical precedence of Israel in accordance with Biblical tradition, but

God is approached, by Gentiles, through Jesus the Jew!

To return to the birthday cake: There is a theme of banqueting in the New Testament, and there is a place for gentiles in God's kingdom in the story of the 'Feeding of Five Thousand' (see Matt 14: 23-21). Did the

⁴ ibid

⁵ ibid

⁶ Isaiah 42: 6

Canaanite woman know of this event and referred to it in her play on Jesus' saying about children (Israel) and the dogs (Gentiles). Her request is honoured, finally, on the basis of her Faith. This is the Christian position and the teaching for all of us. We all belong to the same human family. God the Creator made Creation for us all. We must therefore share it equally and fairly: Whether it is the controversial adjusting of exam, results that disadvantage those in poorer areas of our country; Asylum Seekers coming to our shores in the hope of a better future; People of Colour or different race or creed - everyone is equal in God's Creation. There should be no exclusions in the birthday cake of life!

May our prayer be that no one will have cause to write such a song as Nina Simone's *The name of this tune is Mississippi goddam*



*Lord have mercy on this land
of mine
We all gonna get it in due
time
I don't belong here
I don't belong there
I've even stopped believing
in prayer...
Hound dogs on my trail
School children sitting in jail
Black cat cross my path
I think every day's gonna be
my last...*

*All I want is equality
For my sister my brother my
people and me*

*Yes you lied to me all these
years
You told me to wash and
clean my ears
And talk real fine just like a
lady
And you'd stop calling me
Sister Sadie*

*Oh but this whole country is full of lies
You're all gonna die and die like flies
I don't trust you any more
You keep on saying 'Go slow!'
'Go slow!'*

There is another sermon where Jesus taught us to “*Love our neighbours as ourselves*” (Matt 22: 39). Our society needs to change. Let us make sure that it does! Amen.