

The Revd Lucy Winkett: Trinity 14 sermon

Sunday 5th September 2021

I'm a little reticent to say, but Canterbury Press asked some time ago if they could publish a collection of my sermons. They wanted to call it 'Reading the Bible with your feet', the title of a lecture I gave some years ago. After much to-ing and fro-ing and quite a few attempts to run interference from me, it's being published next week. For all those of you who come to St James's regularly, of course you don't have to buy it because you've heard it all before....

The quotation that gives the book its title is from the liberation theologian Carlos Mesters. And it's a thought that many of us will be familiar with here at St James's as we have tried to explore in recent years a holistic approach to Scripture in our gospel conversations, Camino courses, sermons and groups: to read the Bible with head, with heart and with feet. With head – yes – to do some work on the author's intention, understand some New Testament Greek or Hebrew, get to understand the context of the writing. With heart; because our guts are where all our important choices and decisions are made and we should never be afraid of acknowledging our emotions in our faith; and our feet, because as Carlos Mesters said, the story of Scripture is the story of the people. And we are asked to walk the walk as best we can not just talk about it. As the letter of James said in our first lesson today, faith without works is dead. Reading the Bible with our feet means that Scripture infuses our lives as they're actually lived, and in a constant conversation, challenges any fantasies or dissembling that we do about ourselves. As another commentator has said: Scripture is not in itself counter cultural, but daily encounter with it makes us so. (cf Tim Gorringe Furthering Humanity: a Theology of Culture Ashgate 2004) We don't just read Scripture but struggle with it as Jacob struggled with the angel. Sometimes, as in that story in the Book of Genesis, the struggle will leave us limping or confused for a while but we will have said, as Jacob said, 'I will not let you go until you bless me'.

So we don't let go.

Even when we want to or think we have to.

Today's gospel story is one of the most vibrant and challenging in the whole

story. And in order to read it with my feet, in order to be able to preach it, my usual practice is to read the Scripture early in the week, or earlier, and let it live alongside the events of the week so that when I come to see what sentences I might have to say about it with you, there has been a period of lived-out reflection.

The conversation involves Jesus who has gone to a Gentile area - a Roman province north of Galilee, far from Jerusalem in the south. He's trying to stay hidden Mark tells us: perhaps he thinks he won't be so well known up there away from Galilee. But a woman from the Syrian part of Phoenicia – hence Syrophenician has heard of him and seeks him out as soon as he gets there. This woman has agency, energy. Her daughter is sick and she is fearless in defence of her family. Jesus initially refuses to help her but she challenges him strongly. In doing so, she challenges received male religious authority and in the exchange of views between them a new future opens up not only for her but for all followers of Jesus then and now.

As I listened to this gospel, I wondered for whom is this gospel is good news.

At a time when the news is full of fearful news from the middle east, I visit the first exhibition of Iranian art in London since 1931. *Epic Iran* at the Victoria and Albert museum is an astonishing presentation of 5000 years of Iranian culture and history. I am there in the company of the inspirational Iranian woman who has co-curated it and she shows me a representation of the Angel Gabriel speaking to the Prophet Mohammed, peace be upon him, from 1465. A manuscript so beautifully illustrated and crafted that I find myself looking at it for some time. My eye rested on it because it was so reminiscent of the Christian paintings of the annunciation where Gabriel is talking to Mary. As I look at the familiar contours of an encounter between angelic and human with cosmic consequences, I notice that it was crafted in Herat in modern day Afghanistan.

It is in Herat Afghanistan that women have taken to the streets in the past 2 days to protest against the restrictions they are experiencing now that the government is the Taliban. Women are marching in the streets and making speeches. One of the placards in English from the day I visited the Iranian exhibition reads:

'Don't be afraid. We are together'.

A woman on the mask says this:

'Women have to take their place in political, social and public fields. Our presence is not limited to universities and health centres. We are to take our place in social, economic and cultural activities. Nothing else is acceptable to us.'

A spirit reminiscent of one of the final pieces in the exhibition by the young woman Iranian artist Shirin Aliabadi, who died far too young in 2018. Her print from 2008 is called Miss Hybrid. It shows a young woman in a headscarf blowing bubblegum, Not trying to emulate the West, as the commentary says, but testing accepted dress codes across the board, juggling as the artist herself says, the political and the playful.

The astonishing skill and beauty of the 15th century engraving from Herat together with the vibrant spirit of life and living exemplified by the women of modern day Herat chimed with me as I asked myself: for whom is this gospel good news?

My mind turned towards Plymouth and the terrifying shooting there on 12th August. A young man, with his life ahead of him, described himself as an incel: an ideology that finds its name from a shortened version of involuntary celibacy, and expresses hatred of and violence towards women. It's a risk in a way mentioning it in that it might simply give it more publicity than it deserves, but a twisted ideology from a self consciously white male heterosexual standpoint that articulates aggression towards women is in some cases spilling over from rants on the internet to provoking some isolated incidents of violence, including being a factor in the shootings in Plymouth, where the young man in question killed his mother first.

For whom is this gospel good news?

I went further back from Plymouth to the heart searching prompted by the killings of two sisters Bibaa Henry and Nicole Smallman and then the murder of Sarah Everard, all 3 in London parks, threw focus on male violence towards women, as did the exponential increase in violence in a domestic setting during the lockdowns we have endured.

In order to answer the question about this gospel: for whom is this gospel good news, women especially have to be able to interpret it for themselves.

The truth is that the Christian church and most especially the preachers of the Bible texts have a lot to answer for in not allowing women to speak for themselves about this gospel. And before you start thinking that this is a bit old hat, it's important to say that for nearly all of the 2 billion Christians in the world today, women are not permitted to speak publicly about this gospel, to preach and interpret for their community or church how they hear it and what it means to them.

I spoke recently at a meeting of women clergy and it was striking to me that the younger women in their 20s and 30s said that they did not really think of gender in terms of their own identity as much as sexuality or ethnicity. One said that her identity as queer was the dominant conversation she had had with the church in the context of faith, and being a woman had not really featured that much.

I do not take for granted, will never take for granted, the privilege of preaching as a priest and a woman. In my lifetime, this situation has changed. In my lifetime, what I am doing now in this church was illegal, and, in the spirit of the women of Herat whose ancient art is currently on show in our city, it is never over until *every* woman in the world, Black, Brown, White, cis gendered, trans, is free to speak and interpret our sacred texts with others in public.

I have heard, still hear, too many sermons which twist and turn to make sure that Jesus doesn't really say what he says here. That this woman doesn't really have the effect she has. That the all-seeing Christ was allowing himself to be challenged somehow and that the woman's agency was, well, rather little agency at all. Along with the conversation Jesus has with the Samaritan woman at the well, with his own mother, with Martha, with Mary, with the unnamed woman who pushed through the crowd and touched his cloak, Christian teaching, presented as normative but actually from a male perspective, is very often to tell us, whatever our gender or identity, to follow Jesus's example and make sure we include other people who are usually excluded. It places us in the role of quasi saviour and persuades us that self-sacrifice is the way forward. It assumes that we have power in the first place to give over or give up. It encourages us to be kind to the others who are excluded. And in many ways, quite honestly, it's deadly.

I want to be careful how I say this next bit; but the reality is that it can rather disastrously skew our ego to be always asked to take the perspective of Jesus, trying to see the world through his eyes. Because when we do act in such a

way that we think is consonant with Jesus of Nazareth, we can't help congratulating ourselves – and on the other extreme, even our inadequacy can be a form of narcissism as we feel constantly not good enough, permanently not quite there. We can either believe it's possible to achieve a kind of congealing self-perfection or we condemn ourselves for ever for not being up to it. Both are forms of self-obsession. It's a strong way of putting it, but there can be an idolatry involved in forming our ideas about Jesus if we're not careful. Christian faith is focussed on God: God in Trinity. And Jesus of Nazareth was always pointing away from himself to the one he called his Father.

To put it bluntly, to see this woman always from the perspective of Jesus is to other her. To keep her distant from us. And that's what happens too, subconsciously to women and men when women are not permitted to speak for themselves on their own terms.

What I love about this story, and which is why it is truly good news for all of us, is that it reads against us; we read against it. And that's where the wisdom of the good news is to be found.

The gospel invites us to feel anything from irritated to appalled with Jesus's behaviour. This is good for us. God in Christ once again provokes the underside of our mixed-motive humanity and holds up a mirror to our souls. This gospel does what Jesus of Nazareth often does to his contemporaries; it wrong foots us and makes us ask new questions, reveals the depth of God's presence in the world in a new way. This woman shows us what spirit it takes to co-create with God a new inclusion. And it stops us becoming idolatrous about the man Jesus, and instead reminds us of the ultimate trinitarian mystery that is who God is, not an over emphasis on one person of that Trinity in the son. We are thrown off course by Jesus's reply and the woman's challenge and then Jesus's capitulation. Like three dramatic chords at the end of an unfinished symphony we are left hanging, puzzled, a bit cross.

It was the economist Maynard Keynes whose apocraphal saying comes to mind here: when the facts change, I change my mind. What do you do?

The woman's energy and persistence changed the facts on the ground which in turn provoked a change in the course of action of Jesus. Together they made a new world possible, founded in a passionate desire for healing, a commitment

to wholeness for all people, and a creative willingness not just to take the first answer as the only answer, but to turn that answer back into a question.

What I'm saying is that there is something in the gospel movement between convention and transgression, testing the boundaries of what can be said, how to be together in public. She starts with a conventional approach by coming to the religious leader in supplication. But when she finds no acceptable response, she changes tack and moves swiftly to challenge and stays challenging until they together make the change.

This is the gospel good news for women and men and everyone in between. Because we are immersed in a thrilling adventure of a religion, which seeks out and finds beauty in the cracks, in the inbetween times, in the uncertainty and shadow of vulnerable human relationships.

In the manner of the Syrophenician woman we learn to challenge without shaming the one challenged.

And in the manner of Jesus we learn to move, learn to respond when events change before us or voices previously unheard say what they have to say without fear.

This gospel saves us from practising a religion more interested in answers than questions, from becoming a religion that is only interested in the man at the top, from becoming a religion that is mono cultural, or set in its ways.

This gospel saves us from what we human beings always try to turn faith into; a statement of rules, certainties and immutable assumptions. And an authority structure that brooks no challenge no opposition no change of heart.

Together this woman and Jesus uncover a new truth, a deeper inclusion, and together they see the outlines of a kingdom that is transformative for all who have ears to hear.

This gospel is bad news for any part of us, and anyone, woman or man, who likes everything the way it is and has been set up to be in our favour. It is bad news for the parts of us that benefit from unjust authority structures or boundaries drawn tightly around who's in and who's out when we're in ourselves.

We human beings of any background may find ourselves resisting this gospel because, with its transgressive discussion about dogs, it might feel as if we might be made a fool of or revealed to be being unfair.

But the thrill is that the promise of redemption is within us, around us, beside us as the kingdom of God. Thank God for this woman, whose name we will never know but whose energy bursts through the gospel down 2000 years.

For whom is this gospel good news?

For anyone woman, man, or anyone inbetween, whose life depends on things not having to be as they are.

And whether we know it or not, that means all of us. Amen.