

Enemies No More

On Monday morning all of the clergy got a note saying that the Presiding Bishop is asking all churches, nation wide, to pray for peace in the Middle East, particularly for the suffering people of Iraq, Syria, Gaza and Israel.

What with religious minorities, especially Christians, being hunted down and killed with unspeakable violence, what with Syria dropping 500 pound barrel bombs on civilians, what with Israel and Gaza seemingly locked in a frenzy of attack and counter attack, prayer seems like a good thing indeed.

Then, about ten minutes after that note arrived, a good friend of mine passed along an internet posting that reflects the fears of many in the west, this being several photos of Muslims bowing in prayer apparently on the streets of New York City, with the caption being: "We can't have a public display of the baby Jesus but **they** can block traffic in America's biggest city to pray?"

Add to that the tragic death by suicide of our fellow Episcopalian, Robin Williams, and before lunch time, Monday was off to a terrible start!

It didn't get any better when I looked at the readings for Sunday, particularly the gospel appointed for today.

Just when I'm hoping for something from Jesus that speaks of people coming together, finding common ground in the midst of our differences, learning to forgive and forget past injuries, well, instead, what we seem to get, at least at first glance, is a whopping serving of Jesus first ignoring, then dismissing, then insulting, a pagan woman..... who's great crime is seeking help for a daughter possessed perhaps by one of the many demons of adolescence: depression, anger, fear, anxiety, who knows....

But as we were reminded a few weeks ago, sometimes the Kingdom of God is like a treasure buried in the ground, and sometimes we need to look closely if we are to find that treasure, sometimes, (as my pal Paul Nuechterlein likes to say), we need to go on a treasure hunt to find out what's really going on.

And so I started digging.

The first thing I came across is that the pagan lady is a Canaanite.

You'll remember from your Sunday School classes, the Canaanites are the ancient people Israel kicked out of the Holy Land after spending 40 years wandering in the desert after being freed from slavery in Egypt.

Except, the Canaanites weren't exactly kicked out of the land.

They were, for the most part, exterminated; today we would call it a genocide; because every last man, woman and child was to be slaughtered at the edge of the sword.

It's all there in the Old Testament, and here's what it says:

"When the LORD your God brings you into the land that you are about to enter and occupy, and he clears away many nations before you -- the Hittites, the Girgashites, the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites, **seven** nations mightier and more numerous than you -- and when the LORD your God gives them over to you and you defeat them, then **you must utterly destroy them. Make no covenant with them and show them no mercy.**" (Deut. 7:1-2)

And I gotta say, this sounds just like an article I read the other day in the paper, except it wasn't the God of the Old Testament commanding genocide, it was a radical group of Muslims claiming Allah has sanctioned the horror show we see every night on the evening news.

And I had to stop for awhile.

Thinking of that internet posting that was so upset about Muslims praying in New York, seeing the outrage rightly expressed about the monstrosities occurring in Iraq, I had to remember that we, collectively, as a faith, have been there and done that too.

Not only back in Old Testament times, but more recently.

During the crusades, the pope who instigated the first crusade had this to say:

"For you must hasten to carry aid to your brethren dwelling in the East, who need your help, for which they have often asked. For the Turks, a Persian people, have attacked them. I exhort you with earnest prayer - **not I, but God** - that, as heralds of Christ, you urge men by frequent exhortation, ..., to hasten **to exterminate this vile race** from the lands of your brethren; **Christ commands it.**" J. A. Proglor, Winter 1997.

And not only then, but as recently as the 1940s, Nazis and Christians found common ground among a majority of people in Germany.

As one scholar notes:

"A popular image of the Nazis is that they were fundamentally anti-Christian while devout Christians were anti-Nazi. The truth is that German Christians supported the Nazis because they believed that Adolf Hitler was a gift to the German people from God. German Christianity was a divinely sanctioned religious movement which combined Christian doctrine and German character in a unique and desirable manner: True Christianity was German and True German-ness was Christian." Austin Cline.

I say all of this not to excuse the horrors being inflicted in the Middle East in the name of God — but to remind me and to remind you that engaging in violence in the name of God is as old and pervasive as humanity AND is completely at odds with a true, legitimate, faith in the living God...

And that is where Jesus takes us with this Canaanite woman today.

She represents Israel's ancient enemy, and Jesus' harsh treatment of her when she first approaches him is a reminder of the bitterness that lasted for hundreds of years.

But as the story unfolds, something changes; and an old story is retold into something new.

Now, you probably know that it was Joshua, of the Old Testament, the leader appointed over the Jewish people after Moses died, who led the slaughter of the men, women and children of Canaan.

You also probably know that the names Joshua and Jesus, in Hebrew, are the same: both are pronounced: Jeshúa.

Joshua slaughtered these people, Jesus heals them.

Joshua shows them no mercy; Jesus extends mercy.

And something else is going on as well.

As we have said a kazillion times, context is key.

And the context of Jesus' encounter with this pagan woman in Matthew's gospel is this: shortly **before** this encounter, Jesus feeds 5000 Jewish men, plus women and children, and 12 baskets are left over.

Shortly **after** this encounter with the pagan woman, Jesus feeds 4000 gentiles, (people who are not Jewish), and they collect 7 baskets of bread as leftovers.

Numbers matter in scripture, and perhaps what we have is that the 12 baskets symbolize Jesus remaking the tribes of Israel; while the 7 baskets of bounty contrast with the 7 nations Israel wiped out to gain possession of the promised land.

Brian McClaren says it like this:

"If Jesus' first feeding miracle and its twelve-basket surplus suggest a remaking of the twelve tribes being led through the wilderness with a **new kind of manna** from heaven, then this second feeding miracle suggests **a new kind of conquest** -- not with swords and spears, but with bread and fish; not to destroy, but to serve and heal.

Jesus seizes the old story, shakes it, turns it inside out, and offers a new story that gives us a new future — one that is radically different from the past.” Brian McLaren, *Everything Must Change*, 158-59, paraphrased.

So where are we going with this?

We in the U.S. are ginning up for another war in Iraq.

There is mounting pressure for us to join the war in Syria.

And the question is: what is the Christian response?

Jesus not only remakes the old story of destruction, hatred and genocide against the people of Canaan into a story of mercy, healing and bounty, he remakes Rome’s story by **submitting** to the cross, and **rejecting** the old human standbys of peace through strength, might making right, war as the road to peace.

If we really take our faith to heart, the fact of the matter is we cannot engage in violence, no matter the horrors of the foe, no matter the supposed justness of the cause, no matter the chance that many, including our loved ones, may die.

This is a scandalous thing to say.

But to follow Jesus is to scandalize and to be scandalized.

Just as the Pharisees are scandalized by Jesus at the top of today’s lesson, just as the apostles are scandalized by the screeching of the pagan woman, just as we all are scandalized when Jesus confronts us with our proclivity for violence, and then commands us, as his servants and friends, to lay down the sword, to accept death rather than inflict it, to love even our enemies, to patiently bear suffering, Jesus beckons us into a new future: one that rejects violence, rejects revenge, and trusts the God who holds all things in his hands, even at the cost of our own lives.

McClaren has it just right:

“To be a follower of Jesus is a far different affair than many of us were taught.

It means to join Jesus’ peace insurgency, to see through every regime that promises peace through violence, peace through domination, peace through genocide, peace through exclusion and intimidation.

Following Jesus instead means forming communities that seek peace through justice, generosity, and mutual concern, and a willingness to suffer persecution — but a refusal to inflict it on others.

To follow Jesus is to become an atheist as to all bloodthirsty, tribal warrior gods, and to become a believer in the living God of grace and peace who, in Christ, sheds God's own blood as he pours out amnesty and reconciliation on a broken world.

To repent, to believe, to follow . . . , these mean nothing less than defecting from Caesar's campaign of violence to join Jesus' divine peace insurgency." Id. paraphrased.

So perhaps if we stumble across members of the Muslim faith praying on a city street, we can stop and join them in prayer.

Perhaps when we turn on the TV and see violence running wild, we can pray for all involved that they may come to know the God who is so opposed to violence that he was willing to die at the hand of violence.

Perhaps we can begin the painful, but necessary task, of transforming our hearts, transforming our heads, so that the non-violent kingdom that is even now in our midst might break through, in these our times.

+amen