

08 September 2024 A Reflection Rev Wayne Toleafoa

UNCOMMON WISDOM

Readings: Proverbs 22:1-2, 8-9, 22-23; James 2:1-17; Mark 7:24-37

A common thread that runs through our readings today is, 'inclusivity versus exclusivity'. Something which all communities struggle with at some time.

It is an issue that calls for an uncommon wisdom, which we are always in the process of discovering, as we listen for the voice of the Spirit in our time, and as we seek the mind of Christ in our time.

In the last few weeks, we've been privileged to watch some great sporting events.

Including The Paris Olympic Games, which have morphed into the Para Olympics, the US Tennia Open, The Americas Cup Sailing in Barcelona, the T20 World Cup Cricket in multiple locations, the Euro 2024 football held in Germany... and off course the rugby, AB's versus Argentina and our old foe – the Spring Boks.

And these are only 'some' of the sports that have thrilled and entertained us in the last few weeks and months of winter, heading into spring...

I think it's true to say, that in Aotearoa New Zealand, sports in general, has a had unifying influence. When our sports men and women are doing well, the whole country feels good about itself/ourselves. We're proud to be Kiwis.

And if you choose to play in the NZ colours, and you're a champion, we don't care if you originated in South Africa (like Ethan De Groot), or if your father came from China (like Lulu Sun's father), or Korea (like Lydia Ko's parents), or Samoa (Like Ardie Savea), or Tonga (like Tuungafasi). If you play in the Black colours – you are one of us!

There is a kind of 'inclusivity' about sport that warms our hearts. The champion wearing black, or driving the winning car, wearing the Kiwi flag, is 'one of us'.

In our gospel reading today, Jesus finds himself outside his own country where he encounters two foreigners who need his help.

The first is a Gentile, Syro-Phonecian woman who has a mentally disturbed daughter. She dares to come to the private house where Jesus is staying and seeks Jesus' help.

Mark's gospel shows us a Jesus who was reluctant to help a foreigner, until the Syro-Phoenician woman changes his mind, in that very clever debate about, 'bread, and children, and dogs, and dogs eating crumbs under the table'.

In that clever little exchange, the woman manages to convince Jesus that it is indeed God's will, to reach out beyond the Jewish people, to people who are not entitled to sit at the Lord's table.

Australian theologian Nathan Nettleton reminds in one of his commentaries, that there are two ways of seeing this incident between the Syro-Phoenician woman and Jesus:

The first, is the Greek interpretation (still adopted by some Christians) where Jesus is regarded as being perfect. He was perfect from the moment he was conceived, perfect as a babe in the manger. (No crying he makes). Perfect as an 8-year-old child in the temple, and perfect through out his ministry on earth.

Imagine Jesus being perfect, and knowing all: no crying in the manger, no sinning throughout his perfect lifetime, possessing all the perfections of heaven from conception to the grave.

In the Greek view, when Jesus spoke to the foreign woman, he knew what she was going to say, before she said it. He wanted to draw out her faith, before helping her, which he always intended to do.

Nettleton reminds us that the Hebrew wisdom was very different: Very much like the Human Development Theories of our day.

The Jewish people were far from perfect. Their heroes were far from perfect, as we saw with King David. Jesus was far from perfect. Like Israel, Jesus had to learn the will of God, as he lived day by day. It was not something that he was born with. He had to learn the will of God. His God-consciousness was something that was developed in him – even though he was what Phenomenologists would call, 'a religious genius'.

In the Jewish view, Jesus had to learn the will of God...from a position of imperfection. And having learned the will of God, He had to take the awesome responsibility of acting upon the wisdom /the will of God.

Jesus was entirely a product of his Jewish upbringing. He lived the Jewish faith of Mary and Joseph, with all its rituals, and all its presuppositions.

One of the central presuppositions was that the Jewish people were inherently better than other races. God had chosen Jesus' people – above all other races and made them superior.

According to our Jewish interpretation of the encounter with the desperate Syro-Phoenician woman, Jesus faced a crisis of faith. Should he help a non-Jew, and a non-Jewish woman?

Should he ignore her plea for help, or should he accept the possibility/the insight, that God was on the side of all people?

In the Jewish interpretation of this incident, Jesus adopted the position that God had no favourites.

He also adopted the view that the 'Elect' (God's chosen people) were not selected on the basis of membership in the Jewish race. Something that would have been anathema to his parents and to the Jewish people.

In the same reading from Mark, Jesus then heads towards the Sea of Galilee where he encounters another foreigner. This time, a man who was born deaf, and mute. Without question, he heals this foreign man, giving him back his hearing and speech.

Another consideration, we need to take into account, as we read Mark's Story of these cross-cultural exchanges, is that the Early Church (out of which Mark wrote his gospel) was becoming an increasingly Gentile church as the Apostles accepted the limited success they had in the conversion of Jews, and experienced greater success among the Gentile populations.

Syro-Phoenicians and even Romans became Christians in that Early Christian community - completely breaking out of the mould of Jewish exclusivity.

James 2: 1 - 17

In our second reading from The Letter of James, James goes even further than Mark.

You are committing a sin if you show partiality to people on the basis of wealth and status.

Christians are not to show partiality to people on the basis of their wealth or status (James 2:9).

As the great Scottish preacher Peter Marshall used to say, 'The ground is level at the foot of the cross'.

There is a temptation to treat some people better than others - especially if those people are rich and important.

You may notice that you get better treatment from people at the shops, when you are well-dressed. If you return to the same shop in your rough looking clothes, you may be treated differently, unless they know you.

I was wearing my robes for Kath Craig's funeral the other day, and a man who always shares a joke with me said, "Oh very impressive! Are we expected to bow?" I replied, "I wear these robes because I don't want to be mistaken for an unsuccessful car salesman!" He laughed, and said, "You can do my funeral any day!"

We do have to be aware of our natural tendency to be exclusive and inclusive because of the appearance of some people who are not like us.

The old school I went to has been taking girl students for the last twenty years and yet they still have an Old Boys Association. I questioned this on their Facebook page and was politely given the hint that there are old boys who are still wanting to be exclusively 'old boys' and that maybe I should stay on pages where I feel comfortable.

James was one of the leaders of the Early Jerusalem Christian church. In James' church, and in his gospel, the table and the bread was to be shared with the foreigner, and the poor, and people of all genders, young and old. No one was to eat the crumbs under the Lords table.

Today, I hope that we are still modelling that kind of church, where everyone is welcome at the Lord's table. James was big on 'deeds, not words': its what we 'do' that counts, said James, not what we believe.

What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if someone claims to have faith but does not have works? Surely that faith cannot save, can it? If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food and one of you says to them, "Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill," and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that?

So, faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.

Proverbs 22:1-2, 8-9, 22-23

In our first reading we see echoes of the uncommon wisdom we find in the Letter of James and in Jesus' teachings in the gospel of Mark.

Before the gospels were written down, the Early Christians had only the Hebrew Scriptures to refer to, as their Bible.

You can just imagine how this reading would resonate in a church and community like Mark's community in Jerusalem: A multi-cultural community made up of people from the highest echelons of society to the lowest. Imagine how they would have listened to this uncommon wisdom: A good name is to be chosen rather than great riches, and favour is better than silver or gold.

The rich and the poor have this in common: the LORD is the maker of them all.

Whoever sows injustice will reap calamity, and the rod of anger will fail.

Those who are generous are blessed, for they share their bread with the poor.

Do not rob the poor because they are poor or crush the afflicted at the gate, for the LORD pleads their cause and despoils of life those who despoil them.

As we gather once more around the Lords Table, may we once more tap into the uncommon wisdom that has informed the Christian church down through the centuries.

And to God be the Glory.

Let us pray (in silence) that we may love God in our hearts and in our actions.

Lord, God of compassion
direct our hearts
by the action of your mercy,
for without your help
we cannot please you;
through Jesus Christ
who is alive with you,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever.

Amen.