

Playing Favourites

A sermon on James 2:1-17 & Mark 7:24-30 by Nathan Nettleton, 8 September 2024

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Message

God's gracious acceptance is so free from favouritism that we find it scandalous and daunting.

Sermon

We human beings are naturally tribal. We identify ourselves with with blood-related clan groups and various other identifiable groups and we readily commit ourselves to serving the interests of our groups.

In Melbourne, our tribalism is especially obvious at this time of year: footy finals time. People walk the streets dressed in team colours, and perhaps even with their hair or faces done up in team colours. People whose team has already been eliminated adopt temporary favourites to identify with for the duration of the finals journey. And people who hate football parade their disdain and band together to form their own distinct tribe, albeit one that is devoid of identifying colours. Now with a few pathological exceptions, people know that the footy is just a bit of fun. It is not something to kill or die for. We pretend it is, because that's part of the fun, but we know it isn't.

When we get to many of our other tribal allegiances though, it is a different matter. Ask most people what they would be willing to lay down their life for, and they will usually identify one or more clan or tribal groups. The most frequent response will be "my family". Number two will be "my country". And from those who belong to a distinct minority group such as Aboriginal Australians or Vietnam Veterans, you might hear "my mob", "my people", or "my mates".

Most of the time, we take these allegiances for granted, barely thinking about them unless they come under attack. Things like terrorist attacks cause us, and are intended to cause us to feel that our group and the the values and aspirations of our group are under attack. Then we become very conscious of who we are, and of supporting "our own". One of the confusing dynamics of the October 7 terrorist attack and the resulting war in Gaza is that the feeling that "our tribe" was under attack as the terrorists poured out of Gaza and slaughtered hundreds in Israel rapidly became problematic when the Israeli military response became so brutal and disproportionate that our sense of allegiance broke down and shifted. We don't do nuance well, but simple tribalism was no longer working for us.

Most of the time, though, supporting our own is almost unconscious, as natural as breathing. We take it for granted that it is the right thing to do. If we see two products on the shelf in a shop, and there is no other obvious difference, we pick the one with the "Made in Australia" label. We are looking after our own.

If a state politician persuades us that they will ensure that the taxes paid by Victorians are not being used to build roads in Queensland, we'd reckon that sounds worth voting for. We are looking after our own.

If an Australian is sentenced to death overseas, then we expect our political leaders to do everything they can to change the outcome for the Aussie prisoner. After all, they are *our* elected government and we expect them to look after our own.

And if times are tough and resources are short in this country, then we readily shut the borders and reduce immigration quotas, no matter how desperate things may be in some of the places other people are trying to leave. We are looking after our own, and Peter Dutton recognises that there are votes in it.

Much of the Bible is on side with us in assuming the rightness of all this. Throughout much of the Bible, it is taken for granted that God is on the side of a chosen people, and that it is right to favour the interests of our people over the interests of those who are not the chosen ones, not of our people.

In the reading we heard tonight from Mark's gospel, Jesus himself seemed to endorse this view. For some reason which is not made clear, Jesus is away from his homeland and people. He is in the region of Tyre, gentile territory. The land of the unchosen ones, the outsiders, the "not us". We're told he didn't want anyone to know he was there, perhaps because he was trying to take a break from the publicity, and perhaps too because his being there would have aroused the suspicion of folks back home. What was he doing visiting these disreputable and often hostile outsiders?

Whatever he is doing there, while he is there he is approached by a local gentile woman who begs him to heal her daughter who is suffering from a demonic torment. And Jesus replies, "Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs."

Now let's leave aside the implications of the term "dog" for a minute, and try to see what Jesus is saying here. He is simply saying that he is an Israelite, and it is the children of Israel who have a right to expect his services. Perhaps he is saying that his resources are limited and he has to appropriately prioritise his use of those resources. Israelites first. After all, as we often say, charity begins at home. We'd be upset if our government spent its money funding health services in other countries and then didn't have enough money to provide proper hospital care for us Australians here at home, wouldn't we? Perfectly normal. Good common sense. Isn't it?

Well, maybe we have to address the question of why Jesus calls the woman and her daughter "dogs" before we can draw a definite conclusion. You see it is pretty hard to find any explanation of this that doesn't sound racist.

There is a possible explanation that says that Jesus is being deliberately shocking to contrast this woman's faith with the lack of it in the Pharisees he encountered in the immediately previous story, the one we heard last week. The Pharisees who had little reason to be offended, took offence at Jesus, and this woman who is given every reason to be offended is not, but has faith. And when it comes to the way we respond to Jesus, the opposite of faith is not doubt, but offence. We either put our faith in him, or we take offence at him. But even this theory relies on acknowledging that what Jesus says is offensive, racist, even if he was only doing it for shock value and not for real.

But it also may have been for real, and this need not destroy our understanding of the sinless Jesus. We sometimes make the mistake of getting our concept of sinlessness tangled up with the idea of omniscience, and we need to separate them. Our understanding of Jesus's humanity depends on it.

To say that Jesus was without sin does not mean that at the age of two, he could already discern between the things his mother said that were true and the things she said because that was the way she had been brought up. Anyone who is raised in a racist culture will grow up with racist assumptions, but at some point something happens and you become aware that this is not the only way to think. You become aware that you could choose not to think of gentiles as dogs. And at that point, whether it happens at age twelve or age thirty, you become responsible for being racist or not being racist.

The decision you make at that moment will be to change or to sin. From that moment on, racism will no longer be just a part of your cultural inheritance, it will be a choice, and a sinful choice. And it is perfectly consistent with our understanding of Jesus as the person who never sinned that this is his moment of realisation. At this moment, this gentile woman challenges the racism of his inherited world view.

And a lesser man would have been angered by the challenge and poured scorn on her. A lesser man could not have coped with the questioning of his people's beliefs. And a lesser man certainly wouldn't have accepted the challenge from a gentile, and even less from a gentile woman. But a real man, a perfect sinless whole human being is not only able to accept the challenge, but he is able to reframe his world view on the spot, acknowledge the wrongness of the position he had previously expressed, and respond with grace and humour.

“Touché! You're absolutely right! Your words have carried the day. Go home. The demons are gone. Your daughter is free.”

Now where does that leave us? Well it leaves us with Jesus having expressed something that we mostly take for granted – charity begins at home, look after your own first – and then promptly repented of it. And in case you think it was a one off, the very next story which we also heard read tonight has Jesus, still in gentile territory but on his way home, being asked to heal another gentile, and this time he has no questions. He responds readily.

When we turn across to our reading from the letter of James, we find that James has taken on board the radical implications of this, but that the churches are still struggling to come to terms with it. No surprise perhaps; the churches are *still* struggling to come to terms with it in our day.

“Sisters and brothers,” says James, “if you really believe in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ, how come you still play favourites?” How come you are still more ready to welcome some people into your gatherings than others? How come you show a warmer and more enthusiastic welcome to that educated, employed, tolerant, socially aware, piano playing, couple with children, than you do to that awkward unemployed bloke with the heavy accent?

What has been convicting me more and more of late is that I don't think James' words about playing favourites are exhausted by his example of who we will welcome into our gatherings. I think perhaps he might have asked “Why are you playing favourites?” when he saw our

immigration and border protection policies. And I think he might have asked “Why are you playing favourites?” when he saw our “Buy Australian” campaigns. And I think he might have asked “Why are you playing favourites?” when he heard our angst over whether our taxes were funding services on our side of the border or the other side of the border. And he might even ask “Why are you playing favourites?” when he heard us say charity begins at home, or you’ve got to look after your own first, or I’d lay down my life for my family.

You see, James grounds his challenge in our belief in our Lord Jesus Christ. “If you really believe in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ, how come you still play favourites?” And this is much more than just realising that Jesus acknowledged that gentiles might be worthy of his healing touch too. This is about recognising that Jesus did not lay down his life for his family or his tribe or his nation, but for absolutely everybody, no exceptions, no favourites.

This is about recognising that in Jesus Christ, God is reconciling the whole earth to Godself and to one another, no exceptions, no favourites. This is about recognising that it doesn’t matter who you are, or what your life experience is, or what your beliefs and cultural assumptions might be, in Jesus Christ you are embraced in God’s astonishing generous love. In Jesus Christ you are welcomed into the one tribal group that is not defined by who is inside it and who is outside of it, but by its absolute openness to the inclusion of everyone.

And now, having been gathered up in that extravagant grace, having been drawn into that no-favourites-no-exceptions belonging and reconciliation in God, we are now called to begin to live by those values ourselves. And it is precisely because that so radically pulls the rug out from under our cherished hierarchy of favourites that Jesus so scandalised the people of his day and ended up being killed. And it is because it still so thoroughly scandalises us that we continue to try to remake the Christian faith in some alternate form that can accommodate “tribal” values and “family” values and “patriotic” values.

I saw a car the other day with two bumper stickers. One said “Jesus loves you”. The other had a picture of an Australian flag and the slogan, “If you don’t love it, leave.” I suspect that the owner of that car didn’t see that those two bumper stickers were promoting quite opposed religious views. The one endorsed a religion that happily says “my family, my people, and my nation first” and if there is anything left over we’ll try to help out a bit. And the other promotes Jesus the Christ, and says that he loves you – you, whoever you are – whether you are one of us or not, whether you love this country or not.

Jesus loves you unconditionally and without limit. And as painful as it may sometimes be to the values of our culture, Jesus calls us to love others as he loves us.