



season of creation creation time creationtide

with



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THE EARTH, INCLUDING US



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Note : this text is presented both as a finished 'sermon' and as the script for the full-length major video reflection "The Earth, including us". The location is Siccar Point: a site of global significance in the history of geology, where the life of the Earth was glimpsed.

<https://youtu.be/wG65QWcLnnoo>.

Readings

James 2:1-10, 14-17

My brothers and sisters, do you with your acts of favouritism really believe in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ?

For if a person with gold rings and in fine clothes comes into your assembly, and if a poor person in dirty clothes also comes in, and if you take notice of the one wearing the fine clothes and say, "Have a seat here, please," while to the one who is poor you say, "Stand there," or, "Sit at my feet," have you not made distinctions among yourselves, and become judges with evil thoughts?

Listen, my beloved brothers and sisters.

Has not God chosen the poor in the world to be rich in faith and to be heirs of the kingdom that he has promised to those who love him?

But you have dishonoured the poor. Is it not the rich who oppress you? [illogical]

Is it not they who drag you into court?

Is it not they who blaspheme the excellent name that was invoked over you?

You do well if you really fulfil the royal law according to the scripture,

"You shall love your neighbour as yourself."

But if you show partiality, you commit sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors. For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become accountable for all of it.

What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not put it into action?

Can faith save you?

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, when it's not put into action, is dead.

Mark 7:24-37

NOTES: I have reverted to a more literal version of how the woman approaches Jesus: with traditional self-abasement, “fell at his feet” rather than “bent down”.

Jesus set out and went away to the region of Tyre. He entered a house and did not want anyone to know he was there.

Yet he could not escape notice, for a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit immediately heard about him,

And she fell, [grovelling], at his feet. Now the woman was a Gentile, of Syrophoenician origin. She begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter. He said to her, “Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.”

But she answered him, “Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs.”

Then he said to her, “For saying that, you may go—the demon has left your daughter.”

So she went home, found the child lying on the bed, and the demon gone.

Reflection

What a way to launch out into our Season! Where the quality of our faith is **immediately, nakedly on show** in the inconsistency - or unconformity- of our behaviour when confronted by inequalities at home in human cultures .

But then, as Jesus also said, Nothing which is hidden will not come to light. So worship is no place to hide. Holy ground is where you bring the difficult things. For Geologists, ground doesn’t come much holier!

Our location is Siccar point- where the great age of the Earth began to be dizzyingly apparent in James Hutton’s ‘unconformity’ .

Here, rock from the ancient world, comes face to face with rock further in time from the first than we are from the dinosaurs. Siccar Point may be “the most important geological site in the world”. But only because here, some human beings overcame prejudice to take notice of what was staring them in the face.

I hope, to start with, a perfectly valid way to approach the stand-off between Jesus and the foreign woman would be to reallocate the roles.

So Jesus, Son of Man AKA Heir of Humanity **inherits** the mantle of our responsibility for healing and therefore our guilt for the dysfunctional relationship of the Global North with the Earth and, globally, with the human victims - or perhaps targets - of injustice.

The foreign woman takes the role of the Earth. She certainly exhibits the lack of bitterness that's characteristic of nature's capacity for something like goodwill when given the chance to thrive, to rewild;

Like her, the Earth answers back; Gives us pause for thought in all our best intentions. To honour those who stand to bring most to the community. Then with James we will recognise that It is to the Earth and the oppressed, that honour is due, for the good of all, rather than the concessionary charity of the celebrity for Public Relations advantage.

And there's the deeply traditional bonus too of witnessing what might it **looks** like for Jesus to be carrying in himself the sin of humanity. Taking it on, assuming it, in order to wrestle with our cherished abusive and preferential attitudes; our favouritism, cronyism, class exclusivism, old-style nationalism, sexism. Hatred excused by fear.

All these demons - which without fail afflict Earth because they afflict people. Whose impact the planet lacks the luxury of ignoring. And just as honouring the corrupt and wealthy risks becoming their victim, there's no hiding place in sitting on the fence.

To be evicted, demons have to be named. Called out. Even and especially from the position of the Powerless, the Bible's first audience.

We don't do that by denying, *out of a desperation to avoid offence*, that demons of prejudice complacency and denial **are** part of our own life, especially in the global North.

We're free neither of prejudice nor environmental impact. But when they're denied, evaded or minimised, these do most harm.

So we end up "judges with evil thoughts", rather than responsible healers? Colluding with twisted "fairness" which ignores the stacked injustice of the **outset**, rather than aiming at justice of **outcome**.

Value your neighbour as much as yourself is a Bible teaching, alien to international dealings amongst nation states. We prefer "World-beating" to World-healing. "The continual need to "beat the world" is a sign of weakness.

Its flip side is a refusal to admit mistakes – to continue to insist we made the "right decisions at the right time" and that plans are on track even when they patently are not."

Prejudice, of course is pre-judice. Pre-judging. Shirking the God-given responsibility, of risks, and decisions that are for us to make. Judgments we shirk at our peril.

James offers the bluntest ultimatum in the New Testament Epistles - that faith not put into action is dead. And that prejudice - "oven-ready" attitudes which claim authority irrespective of evidence- have no place in Christian faith.

It's even more shocking that this letter is written so close in time to the community's saving experience of Christ's resurrection.

Written to a Christian community, already exhibiting a dysfunctional toxicity which, with a human population approaching 8 billion, leaches into the lifeblood of the planet.

Reading shock-jock James, faith has no laurels to rest on, but is shown in ongoing, urgent and active contribution to the health of whatever world we encounter. **Everyone** needs the gospel **every** day: it's a sustaining power, not a rubber stamp.

We've brought this together with one of **the** most controversial of all the stories of Jesus, **in a time** when our awareness of race and privilege is heightened to fever pitch.

In the story, Jesus **has** concentrated his efforts on his **own** people, only to be confronted by the equally compelling needs of others. It sounds scarily like governments who see foreign aid as a waste, rather than an investment in the home we **all** share.

It's when we hear of the pain of the planet and wish it were not so, that we also become afraid our own prejudice might show, that we condemn others, rather than attend to what needs to change in us as much as them.

Asking them to change first, both when they're more **and** less responsible. The G7 met first without the Least Developed Countries and the Small Island Developing states. Pray God that these parties come together in the court of COP. In Glasgow this November:

If there are answers, these will at worst involve, at best come from the poor and the marginalised including the Earth. Would it be such a strange thing to impute "honour to the poor" - perhaps in listening respectfully to the witness of the 'Small Island States' at COP this November ?

That's the blessing enjoyed, you **might** say, by the poor and oppressed.

The blessing those **oppressed by proxy** as freak weather takes its toll enjoy:

The knowledge, first, of what's heading for everyone else without far-reaching change at every level.

And I do mean **every** level. Their voice should be honoured and respected above those of the wealthy who imagine themselves secure. Though perhaps we have seen this year in the **Environmental disasters afflicting the global north, the downside of favouritism:**

favour the rich ahead of the prophetic word of the suffering, and the mantle - and fate- of judges with evil thoughts awaits.

Under guise of graciousness, we exempt broken people from pointing to healing as if the hurting have no competence to contribute.

Jesus does the opposite. Includes the disadvantaged, the marginalised, the victims of prejudice. He doesn't impose cure without consultation. No one is exempt. Neither the unjust nor the just.

If there is a "demon" at large, both in the story from Mark and in our churches, perhaps it is the demon of internalised oppression, or the illusion that the help we ourselves might offer is of no value. Or prayer *is* of value, but we dare not ask to imagine how.

Now, as our friend the evil judge might say,

"No respectable person is ever a racist. Of course not. Not the slightest little bit". And the time is probably coming - and has certainly been speeded up this summer, when "nobody in their right mind will want to be seen to be as crass and stupid as a climate denier".

Yet custom on auto-pilot bridles our thinking, vaccinating us *against* real and urgent change. So we see repentance as a threat, rather than a liberation. Action as immoderate, hesitation as wisdom.

But what about -apparently- saying helping desperate people - or rescuing refugees- is like feeding dogs with food earmarked for children? - because Jesus' agenda then, like that of most who first hear it, was 'my people first'.

Ouch. Cliff-edge. Or should we reach for those sad old anaesthetic '**Jesus didn't say that really**' arguments?

For some the easiest way out of the difficult story of Jesus and the foreign woman, is to stick with the top layer : to protect themselves by smearing Jesus with **historical** prejudice.

For it is, *as* a pious **Jewish** healer with reputation for results, that Jesus is approached by this desperate foreign mother. Some like to say she had great faith in God, but all we hear is of her grovelling - she 'fell at his feet' - on behalf of her troubled daughter.

Bible Commentaries never tire of pointing out the cultural incongruousness of a lone woman, aggravated by being, as it were, an unclean alien, approaching a Jewish man of Jesus' time and place.

And yet the historical and geographical particularities of alienation - Galilean man, Syrophoenician woman- won't muzzle the contemporary bite of this tale so craftily included as good news about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God.

Some see it **this** way. Jesus, embodying the respectable prejudice of his people, embodies in himself our own need to learn and change, being taught by this woman who is qualified by her many disadvantages,

She is one of the few in the New Testament who answer Jesus back and get away with it. He commends **her**, and not only her **daughter**, but the visible aspect of Jesus' own outlook is seen to be made whole.

It's a solid enough layer for some, though it's not the only rock to build on, and for those, more desperate to **protect** Jesus than to get to know him, it will be a stumbling block.

Likewise the small scope of the story .

Despite the healing, surrounding society continues unchanged - so please bear that in mind next time someone questions the point of **your** small environmental action - although the world is not globally sorted out, there's a whole lot of healing going on. Not only of the woman's child, but also of herself.

Healing with Jesus is not an individual matter, and has ripples. Jesus' healings are never either passive or imposed without consent: they come about through active interaction with the person or 'bubble' or community concerned.

Could we meet the Earth in that way?