

“Jolted by grace” - Matthew 15: 21 -28 – sermon preached at Knox Church Dunedin by Kerry Enright on 17 August 2014

We need women like that, Canaanite women. Our nation needs them. Our Church needs them. We need them.

Let me tell you about one. My tipuna wahine, my great great grandmother, was Tiramate. Our family believes that when Tiramate died on the 3rd of December 1891, she was buried at a place called Maioro, just across the river from Port Waikato where she had lived, on the west coast of the north island. The burial ground, the urupa, was unmarked, but local Maori and Pakeha knew where it was and it was left untroubled. It was sacred ground. This was some of the land confiscated by the Crown because people had supported the Kingitanga movement during the Land Wars. Next to the urupa, a forest was planted. Then it was discovered there was valuable iron in the black sand. New Zealand Steel started open cast mining. They were given permission to mine the land near the urupa and it appears, mistakenly or thoughtlessly, they mined the urupa, because bones were found in the sand as it was conveyed for processing at the Steel Mill.

And this is where we come to the Canaanite woman. Her name is Nganeko Minhinnick of Ngati Te Ata. She is now about 74, and she has spent her life trying to protect the wellbeing of the lower reaches of the Manukau Harbour. In 1985 she brought a Claim to the Waitangi Tribunal to protect the natural resources of the Harbour. The claim alleged that by failing to protect Waikato people - in the use, ownership & enjoyment of their lands & fisheries - the Crown had failed to meet its Treaty responsibilities.

She has been involved with about 100 court cases, the most recent to stop NZ Steel from disturbing the bodies of our ancestors. Last year she was made a Dame, Dame Nganeko Minhinnick.

How did she become a Canannite woman? This is what she said -

'All my elder brothers & sisters looked after me. My mother couldn't speak, read or write English - or drive - & my father died when I was 9. So I was mum's gopher & translator. When I was 11 there was a meeting at mum's & all the elders were there. They said to me that in the morning they would take me to the bus stop & I would go up to Auckland & go to the Maori Land Court. I said OK, but now it seems ridiculous. Who at 11 would say OK to such a request?'

'When I was 13 my brothers asked me to write a letter to the Pakeha telling them off for what they were doing to the Waikato River.'

She came from a distinguished family but she was shy. But she could see what was happening, and so over time, with encouragement, with instruction from the elders, she gained heart and confidence. She has been arrested and abused, criticised and condemned and she keeps on keeping on. When I was growing up, her marae was the one at which we spent most time. If a Pakeha or her own people treated her whanau disrespectfully, she would challenge them, because she loves her people, she respects her ancestors, she cherishes the land. When you are with her, you feel valued and protected.

A Canaanite woman.

Eva Rickard from Raglan. Land was taken from Maori for an aerodrome during World War Two. After the war, instead of it being returned to the iwi, it became a golf course. For which homes were razed, land cleared and graves were bulldozed. In 1975 a petition with 60,000 signatures was presented in Parliament. Parliament put the Waitangi Tribunal in place. In 1978, Eva Rickard was arrested in a sit-in protest. There were many arrests, many court cases, much brutality, much abuse, much perseverance. When the cases went to court, the charges were dismissed. Eventually the Government relented and the golf course became a farm and a training centre. In 1984, she led a hikoi, a march, to Waitangi demanding fairer treatment.

A Canaanite woman.

The bulletin cover presents a picture: Jesus resisting; the woman insisting.

Here is a woman desperately worried about her daughter, concerned about how she was behaving. She didn't know what to do. She didn't know who could help. She was lost for answers. She pleaded. She cried out. She shouted for attention. But Jesus did not answer. Perhaps he pretended not to hear. Perhaps he pretended he could not see her. Silence. No answer. Avoidance.

With his disciples whispering in his ear: "Send her away, she keeps shouting at us." You can hear them whispering to each other - we knew this wasn't a good idea. We tried to tell him but he wouldn't listen. Tyre and Sidon, for goodness sake! Notoriously pagan. Commercially tempting. Culturally and religiously seductive. Gentile territory. Beyond the bounds. Only trouble. And a Canaanite woman, to boot. We occupied their land. They see us as enemies. We should not be here. Let's get out of here as fast as we can. Send her away.

And then Jesus rationalises his avoidance. "I was only sent to the people of Israel". The cool, reasoned, thoughtful dismissal! The disciples had got to him. Go away, he was saying. I am not going to help you.

How easy it would have been for her to go away. A rabbi. A religious teacher. A religious system. A person of authority. A person of God saying, go away, and with a reason. It sounded so plausible. It's not in the strategic plan! It doesn't fit with our ways. This is not how we do things. This is not in our rules. This is not our culture.

But she doesn't. She tries again, kneeling ... "please help me."

And he explains again. "It's not fair to take children's food and throw it to the dogs." Look, I am really concerned for the people of Israel. I am really concerned with these chosen ones of God. This is my calling. I need to be faithful to that. I only have so much time, so many resources, such limited opportunities. Go away - with more than a suggestion that she is among the dogs!

And she tries again ... “yes, but even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from the table.” What a response! Smart, quick, apt, just – the kind of thing I think to say ten minutes later. She persuades him to change.

Finally, finally, he hears her. He realises this is important. He cannot, he must not, in the name of God he will not, avoid her. He has to respond.

I find it heartening that Jesus got it wrong and then he heard. That he rationalised his initial response, coolly, logically, reasonably - and he was wrong. Jesus did the wrong thing, he did not listen, he did not attend, he made a mistake, and then he got it right. What hope there is for us in this moment, for how often have you and I been here! How often has our Church been here! How often has our nation been here!

The trouble has often been because the words came from people I did not like or with whom I did not agree or who could not say things in a way that made sense to me at first hearing.

Even as I speak, moments flood into my mind of when I have dismissed, avoided, rationalised away, sent away, precisely what I needed to have heard, but through a person’s courage, stropiness, perseverance, doggedness, and sometimes rudeness, through tactics of all kinds, eventually someone has helped me hear, made me hear, and my life changed.

There is a lot at stake here. Do people in this congregation feel heartened enough, confident enough, encouraged enough, to express their deepest longings, at least among us, and more widely? Is our culture here such that we will listen, we will hearten, we will hear what people say? And that when we do not hear the first time, they will keep trying, and we will eventually hear? With Jesus?

Prayer of Praise and Confession

Hearing is such a precious gift, and there are people among us who at this moment cannot hear these words, or hear indistinctly. As we come to pray, we seek to bring them with us, to include them, however we can, by some welcome sign.

Wondrous and beautiful God, already today, you have spoken, in the ending of night, in the fresh light of day, in the birds and their song, the plants and their colour, in a human face and a gentle touch, in a greeting of warmth. We praise you.

Wondrous and beautiful God, already today you have spoken, in the loveliness of your Son, his determined grace, his openness to be corrected, to be pleaded with, to change his mind. We praise you.

Wondrous and beautiful God, already today, you have spoken, in our capacity to admit mistakes, to be honest and open, to start again, to learn. We praise you.

Forgive us when we block our ears to those who are different, to those we do not like, to those who are not nice, to those who cry out, to those who do not make sense. Forgive us when we pretend not to be mistaken. Forgive us when we do not change our minds although we know we are mistaken. Forgive us when people at the edge, people who are hurt, people who are trying to tell us something, are not heard, and we roll on. Rest our pride. Cure our pretending. Deepen our honesty with each other and with you, through Jesus Christ our Saviour. Amen.

Assurance of Forgiveness

Friends, receive the gift of forgiveness, that you are accepted, welcomed, embraced, held, blessed, loved by Almighty God, through the gift of Jesus Christ. E te whanau ...

Prayer of Illumination

Gracious God, by the power of your Spirit, speak to us words of life and reveal yourself, that our trust is deepened, our hurt healed, and our hearts encouraged through Jesus Christ.

Offering

Let us give reflecting God's gracious giving.

Loving God, receive the fruits of our labour and the dedication of our lives, in union with Jesus Christ, through whom we pray. Amen.

Charge

This week you will make mistakes. It is not the end.

This week you will not hear. It is not the end.

This week you will not be heard. It is not the end.

Jesus Christ is with you, to help you speak again, to help you eventually hear.

Open your hearts to him and others, as best you can, trusting in