

“The audacity of hope” a sermon based on James 2:1-10, 14-17 and Mark 7:24-30 preached by Kerry Enright at Knox Church Dunedin New Zealand on 9 September 2018.

I wish I had the skill of the Syrophenician woman. She was able to respond to a cruel putdown with a thoughtful compelling retort. She had made an ordinary request – she begged Jesus to heal her daughter. But it was no ordinary put down – Jesus called her a dog. He had not come for Gentiles like her.

How do we respond to putdowns?

It’s a living question for women.

Cathy Murphy is an Auckland barrister. She notes how words are used of women and not men. Women are called stropky; men, she says, are called confident. Women are called abrasive; men, she says, are called self-assured, assertive, forceful and authoritative.

She notes how in the law young women especially are subject to unwelcome and inappropriate sexism in relation to opportunity, promotion and pay equity. It is mainly young women lawyers who have had to initiate public protest about inappropriate behaviour.

The advice she received was to stay quiet and “do your best to effect change from within”. “Be aware of the impact of critical public statements on your ability to practise law.” She details twenty-five years’ experience of discrimination.

She says:

“As women, we are conditioned from as young as 13 or 14 to rapidly assess the tone and content of sexually-laden conversation to determine if it can be diplomatically shut down or there is a risk of the scene turning nasty and becoming castigatory or unsafe. In case it is unclear, we are called upon to employ this skill with ludicrous regularity.”

“So, fortunately, or unfortunately depending on your perspective, I am now too angry to stay silent notwithstanding that there may be adverse consequences of speaking out.”

“Progress is glacial ... Monumental, seismic, permeating change is needed right now.

“It is not as complicated as it is made out to be. It is about respect for people who are equal. Respect not just women's bodies but their minds, their work, and their views. For those men who whimper about the perils of not knowing how to conduct themselves in the MeToo age, and fear the potential impact of the wrong word or action on their careers, I say welcome to the chronic vulnerability of a woman's world

Two months ago a report was released that described similar dynamics in the Presbyterian Church. Very little progress has been made over the last twenty-five years regarding the equality of women and men in ministry. There are signs that the situation is worse. When the report was released I asked a colleague what she felt could be done. She felt that it was not safe to speak out on such issues in the church. So people are taking up the report in less direct ways.

The way we respond depends on our hope of change.

Barack Obama spoke of ‘the audacity of hope’:

‘Hope in the face of difficulty, hope in the face of uncertainty, the audacity of hope: In the end, that is God's greatest gift to us [...] a belief in things not seen, a belief that there are better days ahead.’

Audacity can mean 'boldness or daring' especially when challenging assumptions or tackling something difficult or dangerous. It can also mean 'impudence'.

The Syrophenician woman had the audacity of hope to act as she did, taking a risk to save her daughter. A nameless woman on the margins, apparently powerless in the face of the teacher from Galilee, second class, not of the faith. She acted with boldness and impudence. She challenged the assumption Jesus made. She did so in a straightforward way.

"Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs."

Her challenge changed Jesus, led to the healing of her daughter and perhaps paved the way for gentiles to be thought of as people of God.

For Mark, God is active in the challenge of the woman, the outsider.

For Mark, God does not conform to the norms of human institutions.

For Mark, God challenges and changes Jesus through the Syrophenician woman.

Here is a dynamic exchange with power for change.

The audacity of hope fired the Hebrews' concern for the poor, the foreigner, the orphan and the widow.

The audacity of hope awakened the writer of James to imagine a world where poor people were God's chosen, where cleanliness and wealth and fine clothes were irrelevant.

The audacity of hope imagines a people whose action follows faith.

There is in New Zealand a group for Catholic lawyers called the St Thomas More Society. I asked a Catholic lawyer why there was a group for Catholic lawyers and none for Protestants. *"Because you didn't need one. Remember what it was like for the Irish coming to New Zealand. They had to struggle for their place in society. They were not naturally accepted as lawyers and judges. It was such a struggle that they had to encourage and support each other. They needed an organisation."*

We need support to do what the Syrophenician woman did.

We need a community of Syrophenician women and men.

For that moment when someone makes a comment, or casts an aspersion, or passes a judgement, or speaks over others, or offers a stereotype, or renders someone second class, or ignores what is said or persistently fails to hear or does not pay enough attention or ...?

The moment we sense the need to say something, but what, and how, and who? The moment that passes so quickly. .

And if we do it in such a way that judges and stereotypes and attacks, are we not doing what Jesus himself did, making the other second class?

The call - to risk the moment, the relationship, with hope for change, supported by others, so that even Jesus is challenged and changed.



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