



*The Woman with the Crumby Dog © Ally Barrett*

It's not what goes in, but what comes out, says Jesus.

It's ... about the choices we make.

Life bumps, bruises, damages. What comes into our lives and hearts can be pretty tough. We could be forgiven for giving up on ourselves, and on the world pretty quickly sometimes. Or for simply becoming too afraid. Or wrapping ourselves up in protective layers.

But we have choices we can make, says Jesus. Choices to stand in the light and bless, or to stand in the dark and point fingers – either at each other, or even at ourselves. Choices to allow what has happened to us to form us, and twist us out of shape in fear, grief, bitterness. Or choices to allow God's light to shine through and out.

It's not what goes in, but what comes out, says Jesus.

I wonder if you know the story of Ruby Nell Bridges Hall? She was born in Mississippi in 1954, and she moved with her family to Louisiana when she was four years old. America was segregated, and Ruby came from a black family, and attended a segregated kindergarten. But... when she was six years old she passed the test to the all-white Elementary School as part of the desegregation process.

The community hatred on hearing this was such that white families pulled their children from school and all the teachers except for one lady – Barbara Henry – refused to teach whilst a black child was enrolled. Ruby found herself the only child in her class, and Barbara taught her alone.

Ruby had to be escorted to school by Federal Marshalls, through a large crowd of people throwing things and shouting hatred. People threatened to poison her, and one woman held up a black baby doll in a coffin. The US Marshalls accompanying Ruby had to make sure she only ate the food she brought from home. It's horrible to think of isn't it. I bet most of those people were perfectly nice, God-fearing, pleasant people in their way, and their context... but these deep deep hatreds and prejudices were so deeply ingrained that they didn't even see them. Didn't even question them.

Others, perhaps, were simply too afraid to speak out. At first. Although slowly slowly the actions of a few began to turn the tide. The family met with some kindness from the wider community, and neighbours used to help to keep guard outside Ruby's family home.

The school boycott from the white families was broken by a Methodist minister, (God bless him) who walked his daughter through the crowds to school although Ruby remained on her own in her year for the whole

year, and every day was accompanied to school by armed marshalls, through a sea of hate.

Ruby had counselling every week from a volunteer child psychiatrist – Robert Coles- who was astonished at the resilience young Ruby showed. He had expected to see signs of trauma or extreme anxiety, but she seemed to somehow remain calm in amongst all the hatred, and unfazed by the crowds. Coles was intrigued by this, until one day, during one of his observations, he noticed that Ruby often had her lips moving as she walked through the mob. He worried what this might mean...

But when he questioned her, he found that ...

.... she was praying.

Her Christian family had brought her up to hold firm, dig deep, and pray for those who were angry at her. The words of her prayer were *"Please, God, try to forgive these people because even if they say those bad things, they don't know what they're doing"*. She was praying the words in her heart, and her lips were moving. Once, when Ruby forgot to say her prayer before reaching the school, she even stopped directly in front of the mob to recite it.

Jesus' words on the cross, on the lips of a six year old child in the face of a mob of hatred.

Coles, the psychiatrist, said her internal narrative was stronger than the external threats.

And this is true too, of the woman in our gospel today.

Matthew introduces the woman as a Canaanite – an outdated term even in his day, a racist term.

Jesus and his disciples are here in Tyre and Sidon – 'enemy territory'. It goes way back : Deuteronomy 7 says Israel must *show no mercy to the seven pagan nations*. It's in the Jewish Scriptures. There is deep prejudice

here, so deeply ingrained that even perfectly nice people didn't question it. A bit like those people who threw hate at six year old Ruby.

But Matthew is one of the gospel writers that focusses most on inclusion of other nations – he is the only one with the story of the foreign magi coming to worship, and he writes of the Roman Centurion who came to seek healing for his servant as a greater man of faith than many of Israel. Matthew is not a racist. So why would he use such an awful racist term? I believe he uses the word on purpose, to name the semi-buried prejudice caused by the ancient enmity between these two peoples – the Canaanites and the Jews. Matthew shows that in their hearts, the disciples are one group and the woman is 'other'.

She is a woman. She is foreign. She has a disabled child, in an era when this was a sign of sin of the previous generations. And she shouts.

She's a reject in pretty much every way.

And she's awesome : she is a feisty counterpoint, a harmony : she is the song of Mary taken up and sung in a foreign land. She demands that the rejects are heard, the lowly are lifted up, and the God who saves sees even the smallest.

And, unlike Ruby, she demands it loudly. Unreasonably, even.

*No mercy to the seven pagan nations ....* but here this woman is, asking for exactly that. Unreasonable Mercy.

The disciples are appalled.

Jesus doesn't answer her at all; it is almost like he is waiting for his disciples to respond. But they just want her to shut up, to send her away – like we can so often to the 'other' – not feeling their humanity and needs, just wishing they would disappear, not our problem.

I wonder if we flick back in Matthew to the pages before... what do we find Jesus saying to his disciples?

Chapter Thirteen – he’s rejected by his own people in Nazareth, but in Chapter Fourteen, despite the rejection, he feeds the hungry there. In Chapter Fifteen today he takes the Pharisees to task on placing tradition above love. He says – look, can you not understand?

It’s not what goes into people that makes them unclean, it’s what comes out.

Jesus hasn’t hesitated in his life – Chapters 7, 8 and 9 of this gospel - to break every rule in the book. To touch the untouchable – to heal lepers; touch the dead; heal the servant of a Roman Centurion and even the Gadarene demoniacs – foreign madmen in pig-keeping land; to share water and life with the Samaritan woman at the well . It is *not* that he is afraid to cross boundaries, or bound by prejudices. His love is for everyone. But today we see him help his disciples to own that love for themselves to share with others. He challenges the status quo.

Did you think Jesus was meek and mild? I’m so sorry to pop your bubble there.

Jesus articulates the disciples’ prejudice when he responds to the disciples; *I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel, not to the dogs...* he says. It’s an ironic tone we have there from our Lord. (remember those magi, that Roman centurion’s servant?)

And yet... he’s not patriarchal - he doesn’t speak for the woman, or defend her, he enables her to speak for herself and defend herself. And she with great wit and intelligence, does exactly that.

In Jesus, we find a love that helps us to enable each other, to give a space for the voice of those whose voices no one wants to hear.

The use of the term “dog” has two meanings; it implies gentile inferiority, but also someone unlearned in Torah – the scriptures. The woman, however, demonstrates knowledge and confidence, and is fully up for enlightening the disciples. She proves herself more than equal to quote

the scriptures to show how God's love goes far deeper than our brokennesses.

And Jesus answers her – he lifts her up and affirms her in front of the gathered crowd, in front of the disciples. On behalf of all the marginalised, who demand a response from Love, who will not give up, not wait the right time or right moment, but demand Mercy, demand Life ... now. Knowing that God's love has no limits, no boundaries, no time and place – but is always, everywhere, and for everyone.

"Woman" he says – the same term he uses for his own mother, and for Mary of Magdala in the Easter Garden – "how great is your faith".

Today God takes all of the brokennesses of the world. The hatreds, the exclusions the prejudices. The times when life has made us hang labels round our own necks or round each others...

and reminds us of the deepest truths. That we are all invited to the table.

That the internal narrative... is stronger than the external threats.

And ... he calls us to speak out that truth. In the face of all.

Today as we watch these amazing confirmands stand up in the faith we are reminded of our own baptismal promises. And indeed the promise God speaks over us before even we are born. There's a truth in our core – and it is that every single soul is beloved. And that healing and hope is possible in the most impossible of situations. That things can change.

And today, as God pours out the fire of his Holy Spirit upon them – we are reminded too how he shares with us his restorative power. And gives us the strengths and gifts that we need. The inner core that holds firm – and that flowers in un-imaginable graces. That can change the world around us, by stubbornly insisting on love – whether through what we say, like the Phoenician woman, or simply by who and what we are and do and pray, like young Ruby Bridges.

Today we are reminded of community at the table. We are gathered as one around the dining table of the Carpenter God. Who tells us he will draw all things unto himself, and not one will be lost. The one who can take the dead wood and the wounds, and bring from them life and new dawns. The one through whose simple table, we glimpse the glory of heaven.

It's perhaps really important right now, when we have the rising racial tensions across our local community. When our world is on fire in so many ways – literal and metaphorical, When our environment is challenged by the choices we have made as a human race over decades. When our communities are torn apart by angers, prejudices and hurts. When perhaps our own hearts are tattered and anxious because of our own stories, and the labels others might hang around our necks. When the world speaks to us of disillusionment, and things that cannot be changed.....

Because it's not what comes in, but what comes out, that counts.

Let us pray for peace, insist on truth. Use the gifts God gives us in Confirmation Grace to stay strong, to flourish and grow; demanding justice, demanding mercy, and calling out the places where factions and politics divide. Trusting in our own belovedness, from Baptism, and in Love's capacity to reach across all in risky and riotous healing.

Christians. Did you think we were meek and mild? Well, I am sorry there to pop your bubble.

Christians. We do not keep social niceties, nor social prejudices. We are called to pray stubbornly, to walk on calmly, to shout out for justice, and to live in radical love.

In the footsteps of the Syrophoenician woman, in the footsteps of Ruby Bridges..... in the footsteps of Jesus.

So, my friends, let us sing of Love Divine come down to earth, and ask him to make us his dwelling. And whilst we do so may our amazing confirmands, please come forward with your sponsors....



Ruby Bridges with the federal marshalls who protected her.



And Ruby today – civil rights activist, speaking for peace and justice