

It is a passionate tale of treachery, tears, jealousy and reconciliation.

The story of Joseph is an Old Testament myth about a Hebrew shepherd boy rising from the pit of betrayal and imprisonment to serve as governor of Egypt, Pharaoh's most senior official. Decades after Joseph was sold into slavery by his eleven brothers, the tables are now turned. Now it is the brothers who are in desperate need. Famine has struck their land. The brothers travel to Egypt in search of food; the survival of their families depends on their success. Unaware of the governor's true identity, the brother's make their plea. Finally, Joseph can bear it no longer.

In our lesson today, we hear of his tears: Joseph wept so loudly that the entire household of Pharaoh heard him sob. He asked his brothers, 'Come closer to me'. He said, 'I am your brother Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt.' Joseph tells them to bring their father to Egypt, to bring all their families and livestock, and to be sure of their safety and survival. In tears, Joseph kissed and embraced his brothers beginning with Benjamin.

The myth, or faith narrative, has much to say about human nature: parental favouritism, sibling rivalry and how we might perceive the presence of God in suffering, in the twists and turns of our life. The Joseph myth is almost a repeat of the Jacob story with many parallels: both had mothers who for many years were unable to give birth; both were hated by their brothers; and in dreams, both encountered angels. For me, what is most striking about the Joseph story is Joseph's love, compassion and forgiveness. When he saw the faces of his brothers, when he felt their need, he cried. There is no rage or vengeance; no plot or scheming for revenge. His heart breaks.

For me, the myth of Joseph conveys the love, compassion and forgiveness of God; the sensitivity and tenderness of the Transcendent. Joseph embodies the Eternal. As is often the case in Jewish stories, details matter; names matter. The name Joseph is almost certainly an abbreviated version of *Jehoseph*. 'Jeh' at the beginning is from Yahweh, the name of God. Later, it is this God Yahweh whom Moses will encounter in mystical vision on Mount Sinai, the God who says, 'I have heard the cry of my people.' In the myth of Joseph, *Jehoseph*, we glimpse the unutterable beauty of the One who holds the universe in being.

In our Gospel story today we are confronted with the uncomfortable moment when, it appears, Jesus called a woman a dog. Jesus had travelled to the district of Tyre and Sidon. He met a Canaanite woman who begged Him for help. She said that her daughter was tormented by a demon. Believing that He was to help only the children of Israel and not Gentiles, not non-Jews, Jesus said, 'It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs.' Undeterred, kneeling before Him, she said, 'Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table.' What do you hear and see in that moment, in that exchange? Her use of the word 'dogs' is poignant: can He look on her face - no more than an arm's length away, gaze into her eyes, and call her a dog? Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table.' Can Jesus bear such a diminution of her humanity? He said, 'Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.'

The district of Tyre and Sidon was Gentile territory: the inhabitants were not Jews; they had different customs from the people of Israel and a different religion. The woman was Canaanite. Only twice in the Gospels is a non-Jew commended for his or her faith: this woman

and a Roman centurion. Looking at her face, gazing into her eyes, can Jesus bear to call her a dog? Perhaps when Jesus first used the term there was something in His tone, something in His eyes, which encouraged the woman to challenge the accepted custom? It is to our country's credit that accepted customs are challenged: I think of the Pride March in Glasgow yesterday. It is to the credit of many in the United States that extreme views, views which dehumanise, are challenged.

Jesus was a teacher of *kavannah*. It is the practice of inwardness, intention and the stirrings of the heart. What lies in the heart, the soul, is what truly and ultimately matters. Before encountering the woman, Jesus had been teaching about what defiles humanity. He said that it is not what goes into the mouth which defiles a person but what comes out of the mouth. Alt-Right take note! Jesus understood that what lies in the heart is the measure and beauty of a human being. I suspect that Jesus' use of the word 'dog' has implied within it the assumption that He did not and could not believe that. What mattered, what matters, to Jesus is what lies in the heart.

In the story set in Tyre and Sidon with a Canaanite woman I hope you noticed that Jesus crossed a number of boundaries: geographical, ethnic, gender and religious. When we look into the heart of another human being, the importance of these differences fade. They do not disappear, but become secondary. To use Shylock's familiar phrase, 'If you prick us, do we not bleed?' As we look to the future in the 21st century, what will the next one hundred years mean for the religions of the world? Through ease of travel and communication, what impact will the religions have on the world and, more importantly, on each other over the coming decades?

On the site of Berlin's earliest church, St Peter's, dating back to 1350, a new House of Prayer is being built. It is the world's first House of Prayer to be home for all three Abrahamic faiths. The House of One will be a place of prayer, meditation and worship for a Jewish, Christian and Muslim community. Rabbi Ben-Chorin has said, 'Berlin is the city of wounds and miracles. It is the city in which the extermination of the Jews was planned. Now, the first house in the world for three religions is to be built here.'

In 1964, after he received the Nobel Peace Prize the Revd Dr. Martin Luther King said, 'We have inherited a large house, a great 'world house' in which we have to live together - black and white, Easterner and Westerner, Gentile and Jew, Catholic and Protestant, Muslim and Hindu - a family unduly separated in ideas, culture and interest, who, because we can never again live apart, must learn somehow to live with each other in peace.' Berlin is working towards this. The Christian Pastor, Gregor Hohberg, said:

From the foundations of the old churches will grow a new place of worship, one that will allow people of different faiths to pray side by side. The people who come here will remain true to their own religion, continue to draw from its power, and engage in peaceable dialogue with one another and with members of the city's secular population. This house will be home to equality, peace, and reconciliation.

The Imam said, 'We want our children to have a future in which diversity is the norm.' On their website, we read, 'One earth, one humanity, House of One.'

As our world shrinks into a global village, groups with different perspectives will increasingly need to learn how we live together peacefully with difference. We living through a change of era, one which involves the spiritual evolution of humanity. As cultures and religions are pressed ever nearer, one possible outcome is

fundamentalism, intolerance, indifference and dogmatism. Like Jesus and the Canaanite woman, we need to look into the face of the other, into the eyes of the other, feel the hurt of the other; see the Spirit within the other, and learn to see ourselves as co-pilgrims, seekers after truth, human beings wrestling with the Mystery we call God.

Spirituality is a way of perceiving the depth dimension of life; it is an awareness of the One who holds all things, is in all things, in each of us. In spirituality, we are to open the heart; experience the Spirit. The mystics say that human beings are overwhelmed by the incomprehensibility of God: words dissolve into silence. Religions are guides for the believer towards the Divine, but they can also block the way. In the 21st century, we are to cherish our own faith tradition but be open to the spiritual depths of other faiths, to the Divine in other human beings, in those who are different from us. The *Logos* of Christianity, the Word of God, fills the whole of creation and is manifest in different ways and persons across cultures.

In India, ashrams, including Christian ashrams, nurture spiritual practice which truly honours the faith experience of others. From

shared meditative silence, Scriptures are read from different faiths, new insights are gained. We see new depths in our own sacred stories. The Indian Jesuit, Painadath, said:

Christians need to open their hearts to Christ within, experience Christ within as their guru....Christ is experienced not as a teacher outside, but as the inner master, the *Sadguru*, who inspires us from within the cave of the heart.

Our destination is not one monolithic world faith, but a home in which we find harmony with others. The purpose of the ashram is wholeness and holiness. In the 20th century, one of the greatest achievements for the Church in Scotland was the rebuilding of the abbey on Iona, a sacred building to house and foster ecumenical community. In the 21st century, our need is to house and nurture inter-faith community: a Scottish ashram, or something like it?

At the end of the story of Jesus and the Canaanite woman, the woman's daughter is healed. The daughter was demon-possessed. If we depart from the literal interpretation of Scripture for a moment – something I don't often do! – what might Jesus' healing of the daughter mean in the faith narrative? Children are our future. For me, the healing of the daughter is the healing of our future. The demons which cursed the daughter, which cursed the future, were

the divisions which diminished, deformed and dehumanised the woman's life, the life of Jesus and human society. In seeing the Divine in her, she seeing the Divine in Him, together the woman and Jesus healed the brokenness of humanity; they healed the future. They overcame their differences, saw into the heart, and in so doing brought wholeness and holiness.

Amen.