

**Renate Day Two Reflection: Victim/Survivor and direct action focused theme for the day.**

**Why did you come so late, Lord? Lord if you had been here...**

*'We were used to reading the Bible as if the scriptures were letters from our own mothers: a retelling of what we have been through, and words of comfort and assurance that, in the end, God's justice will prevail. The Bible was so factual; after all death had come in some cases literally through our windows... Reading the scriptures amongst ourselves was easy because sometimes it was as if the Bible was quoting and interpreting us and not the other way round.'* (Marcella Althaus-Reid, theologian on her journey from Argentina to UK.)

These words taken from an Argentinian woman came back to me this morning when Iana was speaking to us of her rescue work in Romania and her profound identification with the story of Lazarus – or more accurately, as Iana told it, the story of Martha: why did you come so late Lord, if you had been here?...

Iana pleaded with us to be inventive and determined – more determined than the systems and agents of oppression.

I found myself thinking about Iana's Martha and the other women of the scriptures who cry out to Jesus and who, as today's theme encourages us, take direct action.

What kind of direct action do the women of scripture represent? Do we interpret them – or perhaps do these women interpret us?

Canaanite or Syrophenician women  
Samaritan women  
Persistent widows  
Women with haemorrhages  
Mother's with sick daughters

What do these women ask of Jesus?

The persistent widow demands justice and the fulfilment of her faith: legal justice and divine justice.

The woman with the sick child pleads for comfort and healing.

The woman with the haemorrhage asks for nothing with words, but reaches out to claim from Jesus the healing of her flow of blood.

The Samaritan woman asks for living water – what is this living water?

But it is the Canaanite or Syrophenician woman I want to say a little more about.

The Canaanite woman makes one very distinctive request of Jesus: 'Have mercy on me, Lord'. Jesus tests her: why should he have mercy on her when she is not one of his people? She renews her plea: 'Help me, Lord'. He replies: great is your faith! Why? Why is her request such a great act of faith?

To answer this question we need to return to the Old Testament. The Canaanites become a people to be opposed and even, at times, despised. No mercy is to be shown to these people and a righteous battle is to be pursued. We are presented with an image of a people who live on land that is contested land, who trade in ways that are economically unjust and who worship false gods. The tables are turned and these people become the oppressed, a defeated people subject to debt slavery, a people to be shown no – or at best - little mercy. There are of course exceptions and one such exception is Rahab, who we are told is a prostitute. She is not a promising case, but her *hesed* (loving kindness) to the foreigners who come to her marks her out. She, like the Canaanite woman facing Jesus, pleads for mercy from Joshua's men and is granted mercy.

And so the Canaanite woman greets Jesus and asks for something that probably seems impossible or forbidden. She challenges the command the people believe they have received from God not to show mercy. She demands that her God will be a merciful God; she demands from the Lord the conditions for her own and her daughters' dignity as Rahab the prostitute did for herself and her kin. And Jesus recognises the greatness of her faith. Hers is the only voice from her community we hear in the New Testament.

These women of scripture have different needs and bring different gifts to Jesus. Each asks for something that shatters the models of justice and care of their times. They ask for things their societies cannot easily give to them.

These women are not simply victim-recipients, but also witnesses and agents of the kingdom or the reign of God. They are co-creators and midwives of God's concrete and compassionate action. They are practical women who help bring about: wine for the feast, justice for the abused, healing for the sick, resurrected life for the dead, blessing and anointing of the wounded – or the to be wounded – body. Each witnesses the way that claiming dignity is a relational act.

Jesus' response to these women is immediate and practical but it is also a deep, structural act of restoration.

In the 1930's the German Reformed theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer preached a sermon on the other Lazarus: Lazarus who finds himself outside the rich man's gate. He argues that the story of Lazarus is frightening for us to hear because it makes clear that Jesus is talking practically and concretely about the need to attend to poverty.

*That is precisely the frightening thing about this story – there is no moralising here at all, but simply talk of poor and rich and of the promise and threat given to the one and the other. Here these external conditions*

*are obviously not treated as external conditions but are taken unbelievably seriously. Why did Christ heal the sick and suffering if he didn't consider such external conditions important? Why is the kingdom of God equated with the deaf hear, the blind see?... And where do we get the incredible presumption to spiritualise these things that Christ saw and did very concretely?*

*Jesus calls the poor blessed, but he does heal them, too, already here. Yes, the kingdom of God is at hand, for the blind see and the lame walk. He takes suffering so seriously that in a moment he must destroy it. Where Christ is, the power of the demons must be broken. That is why he heals, and that is why he says to his disciples: If you believe in me, you will do greater works than I. The kingdom of God is still just beginning to appear. The acts of healing are like heat lightning, like flashes of lightning from the new world.*

*But if it were really true? If it is true? Is it still naïve then? Is it still unspiritual then?*

Healing for Jesus is a healing that restores the person to community, breaking the chains of isolation. Jesus' healing breaks the isolation that is: the bleeding woman, the Gentile woman, the grieving woman, and the woman bent double. Restored to old communities and brought into the life of new communities these women are agents of God in mysterious ways.

Iana and Theo's work today and Shirley's testimony spoke to us of this kind of healing in the context of unimaginable suffering.

When restored to community we set a feast for one another.

From recognition of our poverties come our riches.

Today we have talked about action that needs to be fluid and quickly responsive. Iana told us that the only model that works is the network model – but that network needs to be made up of people with different skills and roles.

When the early church wanted to talk about the life of the common good they looked to two passages in scripture in particular: Matthew 25 – which speaks of the direct and 'fluid' action of the church in the form of the enactment of works of mercy, and St Paul's image of the Church as a body.

*Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates them in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. To one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom, and to another the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit, to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit, to another the working of*

*miracles, to another prophecy.... All these are activated by one and the same Spirit, who allots to each one individually just as the Spirit chooses.*

*For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body – Jews or Greeks, slaves or free – and we were all made to drink of one Spirit.*

How do we use our gifts in cooperation to say that God is love to those who experience a radical deficit of love? How do we work to enable those who don't believe anyone will care to speak their needs and desires? How do we become agents of healing, those who help restore the displaced and trafficked to communities of dignity?

Today we have talked about trafficking as gendered violence and financial interest: as a profitable business driven by a desire to consume women as property.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer talks of the concrete ways to resist the triumph of evil – ways that led to his death at the hands of the Nazis. A Christ-like resistance stands with the victims, stands in the place of the victims through three kinds of act:

- Aiding the victims
- Naming and challenging powers that enact suffering
- Putting a spoke in the wheel, so that the wheel which crushes is stopped in its motion.

In the darkest days of the Second World War he, like Martha, cried out for God to come quickly. For him the freedom of his people depended on the freedom of a faith which proclaims with Martha, in anger, in grief and in faith:

**'Lord, if you had been here... but even now I know God will give you whatever you ask of him.'**