

SALUTING OUR BIBLICAL SISTERS

Black History Month 2023 Teaching Outline

Key Scripture: Mark 7:24-30

‘Jesus left that place and went to the vicinity of Tyre. He entered a house and did not want anyone to know it; yet he could not keep his presence secret. In fact, as soon as she heard about him, a woman whose little daughter was possessed by an impure spirit came and fell at his feet. The woman was a Greek, born in Syrian Phoenicia. She begged Jesus to drive the demon out of her daughter. “First let the children eat all they want,” he told her, “for it is not right to take the children’s bread and toss it to the dogs.” “Lord,” she replied, “even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs.” Then he told her, “For such a reply, you may go; the demon has left your daughter.” She went home and found her child lying on the bed, and the demon gone.’

Introduction

- In the *Christianity* article titled ‘Are Black People Mentioned in the Bible?’ (<https://www.christianity.com/wiki/bible/black-people-in-the-bible.html>), contributing writer Clarence L Haynes Jr points out that God does not define people by the colour of their skin. Rather, that is something that people have done in modern times.
- God defines people by where they come from, and that is generally because he wants to make a point. There are numerous Bible passages that could be used to illustrate this, such as Moses’ wife Zipporah who was a Cushite, or the Queen of Sheba, or even the Ethiopian eunuch whom Philip brought to salvation.
- The theme of this year’s Black History Month highlights women. And in Mark 7:24-30 we read about a Greek, Syro-Phoenician woman who, by all accounts, seems initially to be treated rather shabbily by Jesus. She is a foreigner, and she is persistent.

Context

Watching from the crowd

- Jesus’ response to the Greek woman’s request is meant to highlight that his mission was first to the people of his own country and only then to those of



other nations (v27). Nevertheless, as William Barclay's *Daily Study Bible* commentary points out, referring to someone as a 'dog' was derogatory both to Greeks and to Jews. It was the kind of thing said to someone whom the speaker viewed as worthless or contemptible, so it was not what we would expect Jesus to say! (However, Barclay also notes that Jesus uses a diminutive version - 'lap-dog' - which is characteristically affectionate.)

- What's striking is that none of Jesus' disciples reacted to his words. Were they comfortable with what he said? Did they indeed view the woman as less worthy than themselves because she was a foreigner, and not one of their group?
- Bystander apathy is a social psychological theory that states that if an individual is part of a crowd, they are often less willing to help another individual. Is that why none of the disciples stood up for her? Or was it simply that none of them understood what that retort would have felt like to her? Or even cared?
- The trouble is that saying nothing positive can be equally as harmful as saying something negative. Even when we do not have all the answers, the importance of being an ally cannot be understated. Sometimes, all the other person wants is to know that someone cares, even if that person does not fully understand the situation.

Questions:

- Have you ever found yourself in a situation where you chose not to speak up? What were your reasons?
- Likewise, have you ever found yourself in a situation where you chose to speak up? What were your reasons and what was the result?

Who's the outsider?!

- It appears that desperation made the woman brave, because she did not slink away after Jesus' rebuff, but gave a lively response in turn (v28). Her courage and tenacity may have been born out of desperation, but it was still real. Jesus potentially knew that this would happen, and that she would not give up. Do we make people wait until they are desperate before we acknowledge their need? And, if that is the case, are there those who are unwilling or unable to be brave, who just give up and walk away?
- It is also ironic that the woman is portrayed as being the outsider in this account because, as Barclay again points out, it was Jesus and his followers who were the outsiders here (v24). They had crossed into *her* territory; *she* was at home! This detail can easily pass us by, perhaps because we read the account with our own bias - Jesus and his followers must be the insiders,



because of who they are. We do not see the irony in Jesus supposedly excluding someone in her own homeland, where she belongs, and treating her as if she does not belong, because she is not male, not Jewish - perhaps we can also say, 'not white'.

'Early in our marriage, we went into a Christian bookshop run by a black-led church in South London. Conversations stopped and all eyes followed my husband John around. If there had been speech bubbles above people's heads, they would have said, "What's that white man doing here? Keep an eye on him!" I found the incident funny, because John was experiencing a little of what it can be like for a person of colour in an environment filled with white people - but John could not wait to leave!'

- Major Marjory Parrott

- Is there a danger of us doing the same? Of treating those with the right to belong to God's family, as we already do, as if they do not belong, because they do not belong yet? How do we expect them to belong, if we treat them in such a way?
- Even if it was not intentional, did Jesus' followers give the impression that their unspoken question was, 'What is she doing here? She doesn't belong here!?' Do we sometimes unintentionally do the same? Imagine it - we gather with like-minded people, who understand our cultural rules which can be confusing at the best of times, and we can be happily mixing, totally unaware of the discomfort of others: discomfort caused by the presumptions that we have made about them, about their culture, or about their ease at slipping into our culture. And why should people of other cultures have to squeeze into our cultural mould?
- However, the Syro-Phoenician woman's response to Jesus is a bold one. She does not apologise for who she is, or where she comes from. She even takes his perceived insult and turns it around, claiming her right to receive from him. We need to appreciate that God made us all different and values us all equally. It should not need the person on the outside to be stubbornly persistent. We who have experienced, and are experiencing, the wonder of being welcomed and valued, just as we are, need to extend the same welcome and value to others.

Questions:

- Can you remember a situation where you were the outsider? How did it make you feel? What did you do?
- Learning from your experience, how can you help other people not to have a negative experience?
- What can you do to make other people who are different from you feel welcome and valued, and that they belong?



Other Black History Month related links and resources to help you dig deeper, look closer and think bigger:

- A UK-based introduction to Black History Month 2023, and the theme for the UK, ‘Celebrating our Sisters, Saluting our Sisters, and Honouring Matriarchs of Movements’ - www.blackhistorymonth.org.uk/black-history-month-2023/
- ‘Black History Month: What is it and why does it matter?’ BBC News ‘explainer’ on how something that originated in America became introduced to the UK, and an explanation of why it is important in the UK - www.bbc.co.uk/news/explainers-54522248
- The American roots and an explanation of the American Black History Month theme for 2023 - www.history.com/topics/black-history/black-history-month
- Black History Month guest blog looking at a history of black Salvationists, written by William Booth College Librarian Winette Field (2018) - <http://www.salvationarmy.org.uk/about-us/international-heritage-centre/international-heritage-centre-blog/guest-blog-black-history>
- How Founders House marked Black History Month in 2022 - www.salvationarmy.org.uk/news/salvation-army-lifehouse-marks-black-history-month
- ‘Walk a mile in my shoes’ - Jasper Meda (Assistant Corps Sergeant-Major at Croydon Citadel) shares his experience in this *Salvationist* interview - <http://www.salvationarmy.org.uk/publications/salvationist/article-week-walk-mile-my-shoes>
- ‘We need to see and celebrate different colours and races’ - Loretta Andrews (co-author of a book about how to raise ‘antiracist kids’) shares why such conversations are critical in this *Salvationist* interview - <http://www.salvationist.org.uk/articles/we-need-see-and-celebrate-different-colours-and-races>
- ‘Racing to justice?’ *Salvationist* viewpoint article written by Ben Cotterill (2020) - <http://www.salvationarmy.org.uk/article-week-racing-justice>
- ‘Learning to do right’ *Salvationist* viewpoint article written by Linbert Spencer from Bedford Congress Hall (2020) - <http://www.salvationarmy.org.uk/article-week-learning-do-right>



- ‘The transformative potential of everyday encounters’, Tearfund’s Bible study / small group reflection on John 4:1-42 - <http://www.tearfund.org/-/media/tearfund/files/get-involved/resources/include-and-value-each-other-part-1.pdf>

Recommended reading:

- *Maybe I Don’t Belong Here: A Memoir of Race, Identity, Breakdown and Recovery* by David Harewood, Pan Macmillan
- *Still Breathing: 100 Black Voices on Racism - 100 Ways to Change the Narrative*, edited by Suzette Llewellyn and Suzanne Packer, Harper Inspire