

Aliens in the Land (Matthew 15. 21-28)

Sarah Bachelard

The story of this encounter between Jesus and a Canaanite woman has long troubled Christian readers. Jesus seems, well, not very nice to her ... How are we to explain his response? Is he testing her faith, making of her persistence an example? Or is it that she teaches and converts Jesus, helping him to realise, in the words of one commentator, 'a clearer and wider understanding of the will of God'?¹

Well, we don't know – we don't have access to the inner dynamics of this encounter. What we are told is simply that on an excursion into Gentile territory, Jesus was approached by a foreign woman with a request for healing for her daughter. There was some reluctance on his part, some question about the justice or appropriateness of the request, given her foreignness; and then what appears to have been some kind of change, some affirmation of her faith – and healing happened.

There are some interesting features of the story. On Matthew's account, the woman doesn't come to Jesus meekly, mildly, apologetically. Rather, 'she came out and started shouting, "Have mercy of me, Lord, Son of David"'. It's as if she thinks she's entitled to ask for help – or at least as if she is desperate enough to want to make sure she is heard. Jesus is silent. 'But he did not answer her at all'. The disciples are ready with *their* opinion as to what ought to be done. 'Send her away', they urged him, 'for she keeps shouting after us'. Jesus remarks, generally it seems rather than to anyone in particular, 'I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel'.

¹ Frederick Dale Bruner, *Matthew: A Commentary*, Volume 2: The Churchbook, Matthew 13-28, revised edition (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2004), 97.

It is then that the woman comes up to him and kneels, and addresses him: 'Lord, help me'. He appears to respond with a refusal of a shared humanity, and an assumption of scarce resources: 'It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs'. She accepts, it seems, the distinction Jesus' words imply between 'us' and 'them', and yet claims still to belong to the same household, under the same roof: 'even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table'.

And as I read this passage I hear echoes of a conversation that is like a continuous backdrop to our national life at the moment. I hear asylum seekers and particularly those arriving 'unauthorised' by boat, shouting, importuning for mercy, for help. I hear some of us saying 'send them away' and I hear some of us being silent, not quite sure what to answer. I hear anxiety about scarce resources and the temptation to refuse a shared humanity, as we worry what cost to us too much generosity might incur. And I wonder, what does it mean to be to one another as members of the same household in our world, a world of desperation and need?

None of these are easy questions. Often they are obscured by sloganeering on all sides which results in impoverished and dead-end argument. Does Christian faith have anything particular to contribute here? If we see the world and everyone in it as belonging to God and so as 'members one of another' (Rom. 12.5), does this perspective suggest other possibilities for this national conversation and public policy conundrum? Let me offer a few reflections.

The great liberation of Christian life is that we don't have to worry about being innocent any more. We are finally free just to accept that we're not. I don't mean we're all miserable, rotten sinners. I just mean that out of our own resources we are incapable of being whole and of acting from wholeness. One way or another we are all wounded, fearful, self-protecting. And that always gets in the way. Christian life means finally beginning to acknowledge what we really are, our imperfection and inadequacy and failures to love. It means experiencing ourselves as loved anyway – which is the meaning of 'salvation by grace'. Letting ourselves be loved, giving up the

illusion of self-making – this is what sets us free gradually from the need to be justified and insist on our righteousness. And this is what enables us genuinely to be with and to love others, even in the midst of the complexity, perplexity and pain of existence.

Our national debate about asylum seekers arriving by boat is distorted in the first instance, I think, by reluctance to give up our pretensions to ‘innocence’. This is a subtle point – because the argument is about substantive and debatable questions. But I’m trying to get at the ‘tone’ of our public discourse and the source of its dead-endedness.

Too often, those who focus on the supposed threat posed by unauthorised arrivals justify themselves and their position by demonising the other. Like the disciples complaining about the loud-mouthed behaviour of the Canaanite woman, a hard-line response to boat arrivals is often justified with reference to the illegitimate behaviour of those seeking help – they came by the wrong means, they’ve jumped the queue, they are really just economic refugees, they throw their children overboard and sabotage their boats, they are likely terrorists and so on. Although we treat them harshly, they make us do it. *Our* innocence, *our* justification, *our* decency is assured because *they* are in the wrong.

Well, it is true that some of these claimants are economic refugees and some have sabotaged their boats. But that does not settle the question of whether our policy responses are justified, our collective innocence secured.

On the other hand, those who campaign for a more hospitable and generous approach, also risk confusing their desire to do justice with their desire to be innocent, to maintain ‘clean hands’ and an easy conscience. And this shows itself at times, I think, in reluctance to engage deeply with the question of whether and how any limits to refugee intake might be established and enforced. It can involve avoiding the question of how the economics of the people smuggling business in

South-East Asia are affecting which particular claimants come to our notice. It is true that, in international terms, the number of asylum seekers reaching Australia is tiny and that we could well accommodate them without hysteria. But it is not true that that number would remain static with an open door policy and nor is it true that there is equal access to this 'door'. We need at least to risk our innocence by engaging seriously with the question of whether we are committed as a community to take all who simply turn up in this way, and with the consequences for those in (for example) sub-Saharan Africa or in Middle Eastern refugee camps who cannot afford this route.

So what would be different if we could all give up our need to be 'innocent', to acknowledge ourselves implicated in the moral ambiguity of this issue. Well, it might help us to face more of the truth and to begin to have some mature, non-question begging public conversations. This year the UNHCR reported that the level of human displacement is the highest on record with 51.2 million people counted as refugees, asylum seekers or internally displaced people. Half of them are children, many caught up in conflicts or persecution that world powers have been unable to prevent or end. That is not going to go away because we stop a few boats from coming, or because we demonise those who ask for help and inflict further trauma upon them through policies of punitive, indefinite detention. We are part of a world with huge numbers of people homeless, stateless, seeking refuge. How might we be in solidarity with this world and these people? What is our part in the whole?

Well, there's lots to say here – about regional conversations and allocation of resources, refugee quotas and foreign aid, and so on. But it matters how we approach such conversations. If we start from the perspective of threat and fear of losing what we have, if our imagination of the possibilities is shaped by scarcity and anxiety, then that will issue in a certain sort of policy – one where the children's bread is hoarded, and the dogs are restrained by leashes outside the house. We will

create a world like a gated community, where those inside are perennially occupied with reinforcing their defences against those outside.

An imagination shaped by the experience of grace, a theological imagination, makes available a different perspective. It dares to believe that the world of God's kingdom, a world where all belong, can become real in our world. It dares to believe that life is not about defensively securing what we have, but may realise the commitment that all should sit and eat. This does not save us from difficult discernment and conversation about what sharing is possible for any given community at any given time, what refusals might be needed, or what sacrifices a community might be asked to consider for the sake of a common weal. It calls for true and perhaps costly leadership.

But when we start from the felt knowledge that we are indeed all members of one household, then responses like indefinite, mandatory detention cannot be an option. In the monastic tradition, it was understood that either all were saved (healed, made whole) or none were. As the desert monks put it, 'our life and death are with the neighbour'. This doesn't mean that, in the conditions of our world, we can generate this wholeness quickly or at will – but that is a matter for sorrow and penitence, rather than self-justifying rhetoric. None of us can flourish deeply, none of us can be fully healed, while some of us are excluded from the table. That is the painful and difficult truth to which a theological imagination must bear witness in a world that wishes to pretend otherwise.

'If it is true that religious commitment in general, and Christian faith in particular, are not a matter of vague philosophy but of unremitting challenge to what we think we know about human beings and their destiny, there is no reprieve from the task of working out how doctrine impacts on public life ... If it is true that the world depends entirely on the free gift of God, and that the direct act and presence of God has uniquely appeared in human history in ... a human life two millennia ago, this has implications for how we think about that world and about human life'.