

Scripture with Snarlers

Cathedral, 11 February 2018

For me, the outstanding image of the past week has been our Prime Minister at Waitangi, supervising the snarlers and ensuring that everyone who wants gets some breakfast (well, apart from vegans of course). I mean, she even wore a pinny! So, all unconsciously, she is offering us a way of looking at ourselves that sets the biblical bells a'ringing: I'm thinking Jesus on the beach cooking fish and inviting his failed and disappointed disciples to "Come and have breakfast" or maybe the feeding of the 5000 (not counting women and children).

Whatever your politics it's a powerful invitation to see ourselves a different way on Waitangi Day, a way to move past the mud and dildoes and other ignominy. To paraphrase Shirley Murray's hymn *as though all kiwis around one barbecue stood*.

And just to cap it off it's a pregnant mum-to-be proclaiming that she'd rather have breakfast with the *hoi polloi* than at some posh do restricted to the movers and shakers. *He has filled the hungry with good things, and has sent the rich away empty*. Boy! Those words still have some power!

As I've said before, there are plenty of bits in the Bible which make us wriggle and squirm, like Paul's declaration to the Corinthians in today's reading: *I punish my body and enslave it* to which our response might well be: *Self-harm! Are you seeing anybody about that?* He was a passionate but troubled man, in many assessments.

Likewise in the Gospel story today: Jesus chooses to heal a leper but written traditions vary as to whether his emotional reaction was anger or compassion – I'm not going to explore that, but simply to point out that both Matthew and Luke avoid the problem altogether by making no reference to Jesus' emotional state one way or the other. So even within the New Testament we have a critical dynamic at work. Just so our own engagement with the scriptures can make room for our questions, doubts and outright challenges.

Over the past few weeks we've seen the *#metoo* movement take hold, particularly in the US but with echoes around the world as Oprah preached it in a landmark speech at the Golden Globe awards. As one observer put it *You know it's a movement when Oprah rocks the house*. Beginning her speech she said *It is not lost on me that at this moment there are some little girls watching as I become the first black woman to be given this same award*.

And she finished, to a standing ovation, by prophesying a *new day on the horizon when no woman will ever have to say #metoo again*. Please, if you missed this speech view it online. Rosa Parks would have been proud.

Why am I mentioning this? Because like plenty of other people trying to develop a contemporary Christian consciousness I have to acknowledge that I wriggle and squirm when I am confronted with passages in both testaments that regard women as objects and things to be controlled by men.

The obvious foundational example is that of women being listed among the household chattels in the commandments, but I have to ask the question what has a literalist reading of Scripture done to endorse the silence of women over the centuries? A few examples:

Let the women learn in silence with all subjection (1 Tim 2:11)

*Let wives be subject to their husbands in everything (Eph. 5:24)
if [women] desire to learn anything, let them ask their husbands at home; for it is a shame for a woman to speak in a church. (1 Corinthians 14).*

I'm not quite sure how single women or widows get to learn anything at all by this reckoning.

There are more examples. But I think you can see that verses such as these provide the perfect pretext for men to dominate and silence women, for the Bible tells them so. In commenting on this in 1949 Simone de Beauvoir said:

"Man enjoys the great advantage of having a god endorse the code he writes; and since man exercises a sovereign authority over women it is especially fortunate that this authority has been vested in him by the Supreme Being. For the Jews, Mohammedans and Christians among others, man is master by divine right; the fear of God will therefore repress any impulse towards revolt in the downtrodden female."

So as we are approaching Lent, as a time of self-examination and penitence, we could usefully reflect on what it might mean for us to be salt-and-light Christians rather than capitulating to neo-conservative fundamentalism. I know I bang on about it, but the baby is on the verge of being ditched with the bathwater if Christianity is equated with the rabid pronouncements of televangelists. It's imperative that we have a credible and grace-filled alternative to offer.

So what I want to kick off with is this: Men don't get the right to tell women what do, say, or think any more. Heterosexist Patriarchy can sling its hook.

So what Scriptural engagement is going to work for us if we are exploring what it means to be Christian today? Theologian Edward Schillebeeckx ([SKIL-ə-bayks](#))* offers us a way of believing and acting:

In his concern for humankind and its history of suffering, for publicans and sinners, for the poor, the lame and the blind, for the dispossessed and those alienated from themselves by "evil spirits" Jesus is a living parable of God: this is the way in which God... looks on [humankind].

The story of God is told in the story of Jesus. It is God... who in the life story of Jesus discloses to us a new world, another way of experiencing reality and another life-style: so the New Testament story about Jesus is an answer of the first Christians to the story of Jesus himself. Therefore all the life-stories of Jesus come alive again in the life or the story of the church itself. The church becomes a community in which those who have opened themselves to the critical force of the parable of Jesus' life tell stories around a shared table. In this way we too can listen to Jesus story today. We are simply asked whether we will stake our lives on it.

What Shirley Murray actually wrote, of course is, *As though all humankind around one table stood*, rather than my paraphrase *As though all kiwis around one barbecue stood*. But the image and parable of social and gender equality will persist, and I think we can do our bit for that in this Cathedral.

- Ian Render

*God Among Us: The Gospel Proclaimed (SCM Press, 1983)

