

DOES GOD PLAY FAVOURITES?¹

A sermon preached by Associate Professor Michael Horsburgh AM in St James' Church, King Street, Sydney, on the 16th Sunday after Pentecost, 9 September 2018

Does God play favourites? There is some evidence that God does. Take Romans 28:8: “We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose.” At first sight this verse seems to suggest just that but we would be mistaken to think so. This verse is part of a discussion about present troubles, about how the whole creation groans as it waits for its deliverance. The good that is spoken of here is the ultimate achievement of God’s kingdom, not the day to day advantages that we might have because we love God. If we look closely at the words, we might then think that the verse refers to the attitude of those who love God, not to the good that they might receive in return for that love.

The grossest appearance of the view that God plays favourites is in the so-called “prosperity gospel” or “prosperity theology”. The Wikipedia article on this approach says: “Prosperity theology teaches that Christians are entitled to well-being and, because physical and spiritual realities are seen as one inseparable reality, this is interpreted as physical health and economic prosperity.”² Most of us would agree with the view that the physical and the spiritual are one and would reject any form of dualism. We do this because of the Incarnation: “God with us”. The most astounding word in this description is “entitled”. It is hard indeed to understand how we might be so entitled because of being Christians, when everything about us and our faith is a gift, the gift of God. Nobody is entitled to a gift.

The Bible asserts in many places, particularly in the Psalms and in the book of Job, that the lot of the faithful is no better than the lot of the unfaithful. The good suffer along with everyone else, a not unsurprising conclusion. As our Old Testament reading this morning aptly says, “The rich and the poor have this in common: the Lord is the maker of them all.”³ And Jesus suggested that, at the very least, everyone was treated equally by God. He said that God “makes [the] sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous”.⁴

Yet, this morning’s gospel seems to be built on just the assumption that God has favourites. Jesus goes out of Galilee to Tyre on the Mediterranean coast. Despite his wish to be anonymous, he is found by the woman in this morning’s gospel reading. Mark describes her as “a Gentile, of Syrophenician origin”. The word translated as ‘Gentile’ is ‘ελληνίς, which means ‘Greek’. But this is not a national descriptor, there being no Greek nation at that time; rather, it is a religious one. This woman is first a Gentile or non-Jew, and specifically of Greek religion. Her ethnic origin comes next, ‘Syrophenician’. Ethnically, this group was Semitic, like the Jews, and came from Canaan. The relations between the Jews and the Syrophenicians were historically tense because the incoming Hebrews had displaced the Canaanites, giving rise to long held hostilities. The meeting between the woman and Jesus takes us all the way back to the time of Joshua and the conquest of Canaan. This is all the more marked because the name “Jesus” is another version of the name “Joshua”. In any case, the woman is an outsider for this Jewish man on a trip to the seaside.

¹ Readings: Proverbs 22:1-2, 8-9, 22-23; Psalm 125; James 2:1-17; Mark 7:24-37

² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Prosperity_theology

³ Proverbs 22:2

⁴ Matthew 5:44-45

As the story shows, Jesus at first follows the traditional approach to the historical relationships. He rejects the woman, suggesting that God has priorities that do not include her. What Jesus said to her is shocking to our ears. In response to her request about the plight of her ill daughter, he calls her and her kind “dogs”. This is precisely the sort of language that would go viral in today’s social media. Jesus would be required to make a public apology and would hardly live down the stigma, now matter how abject his retraction.

Of course, it is anachronistic to apply today’s standards and practices here.⁵ The words that Jesus used did not appear to offend the woman, indeed, she used them to her own advantage; Jesus changed his mind. What we can’t avoid is the starting point for the story: God had a favourite people and Jesus had a message for them alone.

This is a tricky theological problem for Christians. We are dependent on God’s dealings with the Hebrew people. Their scriptures are part of ours. What then, do we say about the Hebrews as a chosen people? We face here a paradox. If God wishes to speak to the world at large, other than by what is revealed in nature, some location and person must be the vehicle of the revelation. This means that the general statement becomes a particular one. We hold to the doctrine of the Incarnation, that Jesus is the fullness of God and that, if we wish to know God, we must look to Jesus. Jesus, the human, had to appear somewhere and at a specific time. There is, thus, a tension between the general and the particular. In any case, being chosen by God is more a responsibility than a favour, as history shows.

How we understand this tension is central to our solving the question of whether or not God has favourites. The selection of a specific people and a specific location does not mean that the message cannot be for everyone. This is the tension that began to be resolved in the story of the Syrophenician woman. It appears in the gospels of Matthew and Mark precisely because the readers of those gospels were more like her than they were like their Jewish fellow believers. Most of them were Gentile. This story demonstrates that, regardless of what people might have thought, God has no favourites. And all because of this Gentile Canaanite, Syrophenician woman who takes Jesus on. She is revealed as having spoken the truth.⁶ Her statement is immediately taken up by Jesus and pronounced to be part of his gospel. In effect, she changed his mind. So rapid is this transition that it looks almost like a put-up job; like a contrived exercise. But it happened.

The reality is that we are the ones who have the favourites and that we attribute them to God rather than receive them from God. Our reading from the letter of James demonstrates this. If the James of this letter is one of those of that name who feature in the gospels, the most likely candidate is James, the brother of Jesus, but this is far from certain. It dates from before the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD and that James died in about 62 AD. The name does not

⁵ The reference to “dogs” is more complex than I had time to explain. References to dogs in the Bible are almost invariably negative. They were regarded as unclean and Jewish households did not have them as pets. Gentile households, however, did. See Pliny the elder, *Natural History*, 8:61 <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.02.0137%3Abook%3D8%3Achapter%3D61> See ‘Dog’ *The Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible*, Nashville, Abingdon Press, 1964. See also <http://www.torah.org/features/firstperson/dogs.html#> In our reading, the word used for dogs, κυνάριον, is a diminutive, rather like doggy” or “puppy”. That is, it has a domestic and affectionate tone, not a disparaging one and contrasts Greek household pets with the scavenging street animals rejected by the Jews. Perhaps the woman and any onlookers were not as upset as we might be. They may have seen the incident as set in a quasi-domestic environment, which, to a certain extent, it was.

⁶ Alan Cadwallader, ‘When A Woman Is A Dog: ancient and modern ethology meet the Syrophenician Woman’, *The Bible and Critical Theory*, Volume 1, Number 4, 2005, p.35.1 <http://bibleandcriticaltheory.org/index.php/bct/article/viewFile/60/46>

imply direct authorship and, if it is that James, it is most likely an edited version of his teachings.

In any case, this letter comes from an early tradition of Christianity and some commentators suggest that it is seeking to counter Paul's negative view of works compared with faith.⁷ The letter of James has deep links to the Old Testament wisdom tradition and is the only book in the New Testament to have a direct concern with social justice. In that respect, the letter echoes the Matthean parable of the separation of the sheep and the goats.⁸

James is scathing of those who discriminate against the poor and favour the rich. He accuses them of a lack of faith when their behaviour does not correspond with their claims of faith. For James, consistency is everything. It issues a salutary warning to all of us.

When we imagine that God has favourites, we usually reflect the cultural assumptions of our environment. God's favourites are usually ourselves and those like us. While this egocentrism is deplorable, its most important consequences come in what happens to those who are out of God's favour. In the gospel, the assumption is a combination of religion and ethnicity. The consequence is that the Syrophenician woman is out of favour and her daughter will not be healed. In James, the discrimination is class based with the rich in favour and the poor being degraded.

I will not go into a detailed analysis of the temptations to ascribe favourites to God that we might find in our current context. Within the church, a major issue is sexuality. Even though there are substantial differences of opinion, in which we at St James participate, as a religious community we seem to be unable comprehensively to shake the long-standing cultural prejudices that, to a certain extent, are disappearing from society at large. It is time for us to be honest.⁹ Outside the church, the culture wars still loom large and we need to be continually vigilant.

I will leave you with this prayer by Walter Brueggemann. You may have noticed that I am giving you a small series of his prayers in my recent sermons.

The God we would rather have

We are your people and mostly we don't mind,
except that you do not fit any of our categories.
We keep pushing
and pulling
and twisting
and turning,
trying to make you fit the God we would rather have,
and every time we distort you that way
we end up with an idol more congenial to us.
In more honest moments of grief and pain
we are very glad that you are who you are,

⁷ For example, in Romans 4:1-5. See Amy-Jill Levine and Marc Zvi Brettler (eds), *The Jewish Annotated New Testament*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2011, p. 427

⁸ Matthew 25:31-46

⁹ See two articles by James Alison in *The Tablet* on 4 and 11 August 2018:

<https://www.thetablet.co.uk/features/2/14068/homosexuality-among-the-clergy-caught-in-a-trap-of-dishonesty>
and <https://www.thetablet.co.uk/features/2/14108/the-lying-trap-why-gay-priests-can-be-truthful-about-their-sexuality>

and that you are toward us in all your freedom
what you have been toward us.
So be your faithful self
and by your very engagement in the suffering of the world,
transform the world even as you are being changed.
We pray in the name of Jesus,
who is the sign of your suffering love. Amen.¹⁰

¹⁰ Walter Brueggemann, *Awed to Heaven, Rooted in Earth*, Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 2003, p. 35.
<https://margaretfeinberg.com/wednesdays-with-walter-brueggemann-10/>