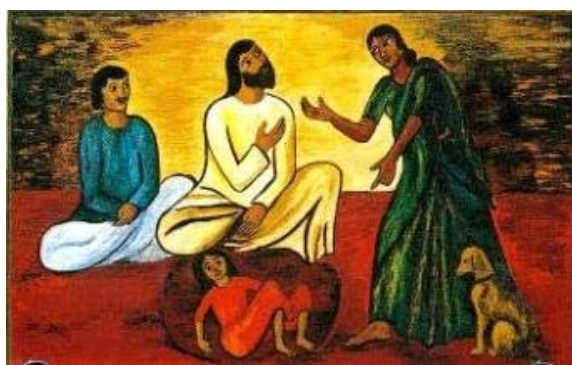


The Canaanite Woman – sermon on painting & text



Here I am again with a sermon on a biblical story and a beautiful painting. This time it is about a woman in need, a seriously ill child and a very astonishing encounter with a strange and almost hostile Jesus...Does this ring a bell?

The painting is one of the Indian artist's whose pieces of art accompanied us somehow thru the summer months. Lucy D'Souza, who is as much a theologian as a painter, sends us a suggestion of steps with which to approach her art work and the biblical stories behind it.

First of all the artist suggests to look at the painting. And this is what I would like to begin with, too. I take her steps as a "red thread" thru my sermon today, and hope that you will like it.

Let us now look at the picture in the front of your bulletin, or here on the wall hanging fixed to the altar. It is the bottom middle one...

My eyes were first of all drawn to the female figure standing at the right side of the picture. The woman is dressed in a green sari. She seems to be walking right into the picture, and points with her left hand and an outstretched index finger toward the little girl in red lying there in the centre of the picture. The woman's right hand is pointing in the opposite direction – open as if to argue...but also to receive. Her face is turned towards the girl, but her eyes focus on the man in white squatting in the back centre of the picture. He holds one hand resting in his lap. The other one communicates with the woman. His face is turned her way, his chin points towards her, and his eyes seem to meet hers.

There is a movement from the man's right hand to the woman's left...and all the way thru the woman into the outstretched index finger of her right hand. This is pointing towards the girl in the dark coloured circle in the bottom centre of the picture. The girl is isolated, alone; the movement of her arms and hands indicate helplessness, probably illness. Her head and neck are strangely bent backwards, leaning onto...nothing. There is no support for the child's head or back.

The girl is caught in something dark, something that makes me feel uncomfortable. The colour of the patch or cave to which she is bound, is as dark as the darkness at the top corners of the picture.

Does the girl try to move but can't?

Does her face which is looking in the face of those of us who meditate the painting, ask our attention?

Our sympathy?

Our action?

What are the connections between the girl & the woman?

Of what sort is the relationship of the child and the man in white? ...they are almost touching each other; or – at least: the circular little world around the girl is almost merging with the man and the ground he sits on.

But still: the girl in her isolation is disturbing to me, worries me...

A second detail of the painting that is making me feel uncomfortable is the dog on the right-hand side. I don't know why. I simply think the dog should not be there.

I can't help it, my focus leaves the dog and goes over to the man in the blue shirt.

What have this man and the dog in common?

Is it the indifferent look in their faces?

Their posture? And why?

It is as if the dog is a companion to the woman, as the man in blue is to the man in white...

All figures are standing on red ground: according to Indian tradition & understanding of colours this is the ground of love and the fullness of life. The background of the man in white is all bright and sunny. And both the second man and the woman are at least with half of their bodies touched by its radiance. The other half of the bodies of the two is reaching into shadow and darkness...

The only person who is not touched by the light and brightness of the picture at all, is the little girl... - unless, unless we believe there is a touch between the man's beaming robe and the child's head where eventually some of the light could flow into the girl's isolated darkness.

So much about the picture itself...

Whether you have already guessed it or not, let me now read to you the story from the gospel of Matthew that gave the painter the impulse to produce such a picture:

Matthew 15: 21-28

The Canaanite Woman's Faith

21 Jesus left that place and went away to the district of Tyre and Sidon.

22 Just then a Canaanite woman from that region came out and started shouting, «Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon.»

23 But he did not answer her at all. And his disciples came and urged him, saying, «Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us.»

24 He answered, «I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.»

25 But she came and knelt before him, saying, «Lord, help me.»

26 He answered, «It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs.»

27 She said, «Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table.»

28 Then Jesus answered her, «Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.» And her daughter was healed instantly.

Reading the biblical text is Lucy D'Souza's second step. And as a third one she suggests a time of sharing impressions of the painting, ideas about it, questions to it... In a group it is good and convenient to share. That is what we did in the women's Bible study. If you are meditating the picture on your own, it may help

to list things that come to your mind... This is what I did, when I explored the painting for today's sermon.

Having explored the painting and knowing the biblical text – what do we think? What did I think?

I still couldn't make sense of the presence of the dog.

I still felt intimidated by the exhibition of the girl's suffering.

I believe I didn't like them in the picture because they were not a real part of the biblical text. If I picture the scene of this story from Matthew 15, I only see dog and girl in the thoughts of those who talk.

Jesus has this image of the dog in his mind; the woman has her girl and the tormenting illness at the centre of her thinking and talking. But both, dog and girl are not present.

Lucy D'Souza however had decided to paint both right into the story. And somehow I came to peace with them, and accepted their presence in the painting: the girl in her dark bubble, and the dog as a friend to the woman...

We don't have to make sense of it all, nor do we have to understand it fully.

Not every figure in the painting has to be important to us.

The disciple at Jesus' side for example plays no role to me.

And Jesus, Jesus puzzles me by sitting so still in the face of the need of action.

After all, it is the woman fascinates me most.

Her whole body language speaks to me with such a might that I can hardly take my eyes off her. She is somehow me, or part of me. Here I am. Here I am identifying with one of the figures in the painting.

As a 4th step of working thru painting and text the painter invites people to observe some time of silence to digest what picture and story have evoked in us. I am not suggesting that we do this at length now. Just take a moment please, and look at the graphic on the front page of your bulletin, before we follow Lucy D'Souza's next steps...

In a 5th and 6th step the artist encourages us to reflect again on what is touching us thru painting and story, and to ask ourselves how we can connect painting and story with our own life & experience. Following her path, I discovered many different options painting and story may bring before us.

If we look at the biblical text we may be touched by a Jesus who'd just had an exhausting discussion with scribes and Pharisees followed by a demanding speech he had given to the crowd. He had just tried to get away for a moment, to be left in peace and rest and recover. We all know the feeling of exhaustion after a hard day's work, we know tiredness that can overwhelm, we know the longing for peace and the desire for silence. We all know how it feels when we desperately have to "recharge our batteries"... when we could lie down on the spot, close our eyes and fall asleep...

So, Jesus may be somebody we can well identify with.

Looking further into the story, we may be touched by this brave woman who enters the scene, struggles her way thru to Jesus and shouts out her need.

It is not that the woman herself has an illness that needs to be cured. No. It is something that may disturb a loving parent much more than an illness of one's own: the child is suffering... from an incurable illness... “tormented by a demon” as it is said in the text – sounds pretty bad and dangerous.

I can so well imagine that it is not only the daughter's life that is tormented. The mother is affected just as much as the girl.

What might their life look like?

Is there a father to support them? Or are the two on their own?

What about family and friends?

Probably they have long ago abandoned mother and daughter because in those times people believed that gods send such illness as a sort of punishment for whatever mother or daughter or ancestors may have done wrong. On top of that you were regarded as unclean when you were ill or living closely with an ill person. So, people kept at some distance from those two poor souls.

Neither mother nor daughter had a pleasant life! And that may touch us as a parent or a child struggling with limitations, pain or/and illness.

It may also touch or shock us that Jesus does not answer this courageous woman at all.

From the reactions of the disciples we may assume that she kept begging for his attention. And when it got on the disciples' nerves, it is them who urge Jesus – not to help her, but to send her away...

We may be touched by the role of the disciple in the painting. There are situations in life in which we are forced to take on or have chosen the role of the spectator: resources exhausted, hands bound, thoughts tired, nothing left that we could do.

What is it doing to me, when in this story I meet a Jesus who clearly states that that he is not sent to everybody, that he has obviously not come to be the saviour of all?

I am touched by the assumption that meeting this woman once and for all changed his mind. Her arguments, her faith, he says in the end, were stronger – and with her help, so to say, Jesus discovered that he could be the Messiah for the whole world.

I personally feel a bit humiliated when I read that the woman had to throw herself on the floor, at Jesus' feet to attract his full attention.

But then I remember how often I had literally thrown myself at some therapist's or doctor's or nurse's feet in the past few months, to break thru their treadmill-like busy-ness, attract their attention and make a difference for Nicolas' situation in hospital. What is there that desperate parents wouldn't do....?

Interesting enough: this woman at Jesus' feet was not what caught our painter's attention or what she wanted to emphasise. Her figure of the begging mother stands upright and responds proudly to Jesus' somehow weird words about dogs' and children's food. What ever may have crossed her mind (shout “forget it” and run away), she swallows it, she stays and waits and makes her beautiful and clever remark that eventually changes Jesus' mind!

And here they both touch me: she is adorable in her dignity and brightness of mind: he is to be admired for his flexibility and calm, to publicly admit to an error and openly show his change of mind. Great, isn't it!

Jesus must have liked this moment with the unnamed Canaanite woman! He must have been impressed, - moved by this foreign woman's faith and determination, and by her powerful expression of her love for her child.

Last but not least: we may be touched by the helpless figure of the small girl – only spoken of in the text but clearly given a place in the painting.

It had bothered me a lot that the girl had been given this position in the picture. It spoilt my sense of the beauty of the picture at first. But then: doesn't an incurably ill and terribly suffering human being spoil the sense of beauty in our lives all together? I mean, nothing is as it had been before... gone are the times of easiness and fun... No wonder the girl is painted lying in such a dark patch...

Suffering and illness make our lives dark and weigh heavily on our shoulders. And it is probably only in doing something that we can make the whole dreadful situation a little bit more bearable, I think.

So, we do, what is left to be done. We try to get help by all means. Try this, do that – no matter what it costs.

And it is not only that the girl needs to recover again. The whole context in which she lives, is longing for improvement and healing. Illness and suffering always affect more than an individual! They are a family issue. An issue of a community... probably an issue of a whole society, too. When one suffers, when some suffer, all are affected – unless, they look away and turn their backs towards those in need.

One more aspect of the figure of the girl in the painting kept crossing my mind: why is she dressed in red? Why is she in the colour of love and life in all its fullness?

I looked at the little girl in her red dress over and over again. And all of a sudden my eyes were drawn to the painting at the top middle of the wall hanging. I felt there was, there is a correspondence between the two. And suddenly it struck me with overwhelming clarity: the girl who is only mentioned in the biblical text, but has no role to play, must appear in the painting. It is the only way for the painter to connect her with other biblical figures, and – if you like – with the long line of believers then and now.

If we look at the middle picture at the top of our wall hanging we can see Jochebeth, the mother of Moses, dressed in white, having just given birth to little Moses dressed in red... Now let your eyes move down to the bottom of the entire wall hanging again and rest at the middle picture: here it is Jesus dressed in white, squatting almost in the same way as Jochebeth does, giving birth (?) and new life to the sick little girl. She is reborn!

By her mother's unfathomable action and courageous faith and by Jesus' openness towards her and her story, the little girl – tormented by a demon – is reborn and given a new life. This will not only make a difference to the child, but will affect the mother, the family and the community.

If we focus on the colour of the girl's dress a little longer, we can even discover what kind of life Jesus is opening to the young girl. The painter puts the sick little girl in red in relationship with all the other figures in the painting wearing red. The Canaanite woman's healed daughter has sisters and role models in the women of the crossing of the Red Sea, in Puah, one of the midwives of freedom, in Moses, the baby in the basket who turns into the leader of a nation, in Ruth and her journey into a new land, a new love and a new home, and in Mary Magdalene who overcomes pain, fear and despair and boldly speaks out what has forever changed the world: the experience of Jesus' resurrection.

You can find all the stories and pictures if you start at the top left: Miriam and the women of the Exodus; then the middle: Shifrah & Pua; to the right: Ruth; bottom left: Mary Magdalene. They are all wearing red – and they are all giving their resources as a potential to the little girl. Her life is now restored and given a purpose and a perspective!

A headline in today's newspaper could be:
“Fearless mother meets foreign healer.”

And the article below would be all about the young girl who can now discover what God intends her to be: on her journey from captivity to the land where milk and honey flow, surviving floods, escaping wars, saving innocent new life, feeding the hungry and loving new neighbours, and last but not least: sharing her faith with others!

So, after all the options given to us, with whom we could identify in today's story and picture, let's choose to be the little girl in red for a while. Let us be reborn and point towards the kingdom of God with all we do and all we are.

Let us every now and again put on our little red dresses (no matter in which dark spot of our life story we are sitting at the moment) and allow God to fill us with the power of the people of the Exodus, with the love of Ruth and Naomi, and with the experience of resurrection Mary Magdalene lived with.

Amen.