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Identity and Belonging

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A few years ago, I visited Bosnia with a group of British Christians and Moslems. One of the most interesting and challenging aspects of the visit for me was discovering an indigenous, white community that had been Moslem for centuries. They were not migrants or refugees, they were as European as I was, and they shared the same concerns, aspirations and values. It was an important lesson; I realised how many of the assumptions I make about Islam had been shaped by my experience of the Scottish Moslem community, which mostly originated in Pakistan, and how many of these assumptions were primarily cultural rather than religious. It also gave me a renewed sense of the rich diversity of Europe, and how little we appreciate or value it. Though we go to considerable lengths now to protect bio-diversity, we are not so good at engaging with cultural diversity, and European history is somewhat compromised in this regard.

In every country in Europe, indeed, in every country in the world one of the major challenges of the 21st century is how we are to live with difference? For indeed, we must find ways to live together in peace, though we are different, because there are no good alternatives. We have seen the way of separation and division; in Northern Ireland, behind the ironically titled 'peace lines; in the Balkans; in apartheid South Africa, in Israel/Palestine. This is not a good alternative. We have seen the way of ethnic cleansing, of warfare, of genocide. This is an even worse alternative, a many-headed hydra that breeds more death.

We are women of faith, and our vision is of better alternatives. And truly we must increasingly take on responsibility for shaping the world. How shall we live, not fearfully but with the glorious freedom of the children of God? Where are our resources for resistance and persistence in our faith?

I want today to reflect on three stories of biblical women who took on responsibility for shaping the world. The first is a narrative of exile. Ruth is a foreigner in Israel, a lone woman. Her economic situation is precarious in the extreme; seeking to provide for herself and her mother-in-law, an Israelite whose life and faith Ruth has identified with, and whom she has served unstintingly, Ruth goes to glean in the fields being harvested. Here, Ruth is at her most vulnerable. Being the people of God obviously does not inhibit the Israelite men from feeling at liberty to molest or abuse a woman alone. Naomi suggests that sleeping with Boaz, her wealthy male relative, is for Ruth's own good. 'This will bring you security', Naomi sends Ruth to Boaz's bed to trade with her only possession, her own body, knowing that if there is any security to come from it, she, Naomi, will also take a share in it. And if it all goes wrong...well, Naomi is spared those consequences; after all, Ruth is a Moabite!

The book of Ruth is often described as a gentle and peaceful one, preceded as it is by the extreme gender violence of the Book of Judges. But it isn't really. Its apparently good ending not only masks the question of what happened to all the other foreign women who did not find a Boaz; it can lead us to overlook what happens to people who are powerless in the face of intransigent social systems.

This is a period in post-exilic Israelite history of vicious legislation against interethnic marriage, of Gentile women and their children summarily divorced and abandoned. Furthermore, Moabite women in particular are stigmatised as sexually promiscuous and idolatrous. And yet this Moabite is in every respect faithful, loving and loyal.

Ruth is exposed, the alien who must prove herself to find even a modicum of acceptance. Above all, Ruth is the supplicant. She must humble herself, must in dependency throw herself on another's mercy, ask for help. The need to be a supplicant has not, of course, disappeared. It is a reality that characterises significant aspects of international relations, especially economic relations; it is the experience of asylum-seekers and refugees; it is still the experience of millions of women across the world, and it seeps into the experience of those whose difference or whose minority status make it almost unavoidable. It is the experience today of Lebanon.

To be a supplicant is something that contemporary western culture finds intolerable; almost the ultimate humiliation, especially but not solely for men. To receive without being able to give in return we find demeaning. Yet even in our culture of power and autonomy, the experience of being a supplicant touches us too; when ageing or illness forces us to relinquish our powers; when

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unemployment or family crisis or personal injury removes them, or simply when we find ourselves in situations completely beyond our control. Perhaps one of the reasons we are so fearful, almost pathologically so, we who are the powerful of Europe, is that minorities, because they have no automatic belonging, must supplicate again and again, confront us with what we most fear-our own vulnerability, our own lack, our own most deep-seated failure. Far easier to anathematise them, project our fears, distance ourselves. They are the part of ourselves that we cannot bear to confront. And yet they are a part that we need in order to be wholly human.

The story of Ruth, which opens with barrenness and despair, comes to a close with healing, wholeness and hope. This transformation arises through Ruth's resistance and struggle. We see in the outsider the epitome of God's self-giving spirit of reconciliation. She has endured with dignity, and others with and through her have been restored. This is a story to counter the excesses of Ezra's pogrom against foreigners and mixed marriages. It remains defiant whenever God's people give in to our sectarian egos. And whenever God is appropriated by the cruel or indifferent, or used to baptise injustice, Ruth's story is a basis for trusting the promise of God and the defiance of those bound up in God's life.

At the end of the story, Ruth's voice is silenced. We do not hear her voice or even her name spoken. The wedding between Ruth and Boaz hints at a new relationship that includes both Judah and Moab. But perhaps the absence of Ruth in the text is actually recognising the way our prejudice almost automatically reconfigures itself. Is Ruth now assimilated so that she can become invisible as a Moabite? Can attitudes to Moab, to foreigners remain unchecked now that she is an honorary Israelite? Or is this the test the story finally sets, not just to the Israelites, but to us?

Concern about minorities has been focussed recently by the increased number of economic migrants, like Ruth, into Europe. I am a European. I have a European passport. My belonging is unquestioned, rooted in my colour, my nationality, my language and accent, my religion, and the fact that in all these things, I am part of a majority. I do not have to prove that I belong.

This unquestioned belonging is something that many people in Europe are unable to take for granted, even if they were born here. If they are not white, they will frequently be assumed to be foreigners, asylum seekers or refugees, and because of their permanent visibility, they will be assumed to be present in much greater numbers than they actually are. They may speak excellent English or French or German but if their accent is not recognisably 'European', their belonging will not be unquestioned. If they are Muslim, their belonging may be particularly questioned, sometimes in threatening and hostile fashion, and may make them guilty by association. My belonging, as a Christian, on the other hand, has never been questioned as a result of the violence perpetrated by Christian against Christian in Northern Ireland, or by Christian-originated violence in Bosnia, Iraq or anywhere else in the world.

To be part of a minority, especially a visibly or audibly different one, is to always have to prove one's belonging, and to have no signs of proof ever be enough. Previous generations of immigrants to Europe, attempting to belong, to assimilate like Ruth, were met by a queasy mixture of racism and exploitation of their labour. Their second and third-generation children, perhaps more confident, or more cynical, have called us on our professions of democracy and individual freedoms, and asserted an identity of difference. In this, they are doing what emigrating Europeans have always done, whether that be in the mission and church planting in Africa and South America which accompanied colonialism, or in expatriate enclaves, or in supplanting indigenous cultures altogether to become the unquestioned majority; they have carried their language, culture, religion, politics and economics, and, let us not forget, in some of these places, their military capacity with them, to create places where they could feel at home, where they could belong without always having to prove it.

Our attitude to the emigrating Europeans of the past is interesting. We think of them as brave, resourceful, heroic even. We are compassionate towards the plight that led them to leave-the famines, clearances, poverty and destitution - and we sing about the pain of leaving the homeland, the hardships they endured in the new world. And when their descendants return to the old country to visit, we welcome them with open arms and praise their achievements and prosperity; the cities they founded, the businesses they built up, the churches they planted. We believe that they had no alternative but to go, and we are proud of what they did.

How curious, then that our attitudes to immigrants into Europe should be so different. Misunderstanding, racism, relentless hostility are daily experiences, and when the many who are Christian attend churches here, they do not always receive the welcome that our faith demands of us. The irony is that we need them as much as they need us-Scotland, for instance, has a declining, ageing population, along with much of Western Europe. We need the youthful energy, new ideas and

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skills that immigrants bring. The image of the rich countries of the world, securing their own interests and then pulling the drawbridge up behind them, of Fortress Europe, is not a very good advert for the much-lauded benefits of democracy, freedom and free trade! But this is how much of the world understands Christianity.

Some years ago, the BBC screened a play on television about refugees coming to Europe. The last scene is vividly etched on my memory. It was of a pristine southern European beach. Up the beach dozens of ragged, exhausted figures, mostly black, were crawling. On a terrace above the beach, elegantly dressed white people drank cocktails and chatted, turning away in horror from the emaciated bodies below them. The impact of the scene was powerful and unforgettable. At the time, I took it as a metaphor; today, of course, we know that this is actually the way many of the dispossessed arrive in Europe.

From our viewpoint on the terrace looking down at the beach (and many are looking, not just turning their backs) perhaps we need to think more about what it really means for us to welcome people and include them as full participants in our communities and our churches.

This challenge also faced Jesus in the second of our texts. In Matthew 15, Jesus encounters a Canaanite woman. Here is another supplicant, another outsider. But this is not a daughter acting on behalf of her mother, but a mother in despair for her daughter, seeking his intervention for the sick body and spirit of her child. We are most vulnerable through the children we love, and perhaps we supplicate most deeply on their behalf.

The story is one of only two in the gospel in which healing is offered to a Gentile, and at a distance. This Canaanite woman, one of the indigenous and dispossessed people of Israel, is also alone, without a male to give her a name or protection. She seeks Jesus out, addresses him in the most respectful terms, and supplicates him to have mercy on her suffering child. At first Jesus ignores her, then his disciples ask him to send this noisy woman away. But she, like other women in the gospels, is persistent, and her need is great. She enters into dialogue with him, does not dissent from his description of her people as 'dogs', but rather redirects it and appeals to him once again as Lord. She asserts her claim and demonstrates her faith not by protesting the disdainful reference to her ethnic group, but by arguing that both Gentiles and Jews are under the same authority. Still respectful, she turns his metaphor on its head, with an astute and daring response.

Jesus has already demonstrated that religious custom, such as Sabbath observance, should not stand in the way of responding to human need. Now, challenged to see that social conventions should not do so either, his own integrity requires him to recognise the extent of the woman's faith and to re-examine his own mission. He salutes the woman's faith, and answers her entreaty. It is from this point onwards that Jesus understands that he has been sent, not only to the people of Israel but also to the Gentiles. The new relationship will henceforth include them.

Once again, the courage, faith and resourcefulness of a Gentile woman who takes risks and makes herself vulnerable change the shape of God's mission. We never know the woman's name, only that she was a Canaanite, that she was alone, that she loved her daughter.

In this story, there is a crucial question of integrity. Integrity is the wholeness of something, reminding us of the holiness of God who when asked by Moses for an ID card and a name replied: 'I am who I am. Tell the people that I am has sent you to them.' When we say that a person, or a church, or a nation has integrity surely this is what we mean. I am who I am.

For diversity to have integrity, it can neither mean endless separation of the parts of the body nor the dreaded uniformity. It does mean the consistency of a coherent identity in the love of God. The most fundamental human integrity is that of spirit and body. The struggle to maintain that integrity, the wholeness of personhood, is acute. So much about our world tends toward disintegration. Political oppression and dispossession, acute poverty, violence of every kind, racism, sexism, xenophobia, homophobia, and the impoverishment of the imagination by consumer capitalism are all deeply damaging to bodies and spirits. Yet the worst threat comes, not from these things themselves, but from our internalisation of them; the subtle ways in which they can colonise our inner landscape, make us internalise their definition of who we are, incline us to live out of our fears and not our freedom.

The church has often colluded with this colonisation, has fed our fears in the interest of its own power and forgotten that we are called to share in the glorious freedom of the children of God. The Canaanite woman, like Ruth, has not been colonised. In the face of insult and rejection, she refuses to accept this as the will of God, and confronts Jesus with her utter conviction that he can help her despite all their differences. She is who she is. And in that identity, she is confirmed.

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And finally, in John 12, here is Mary of Bethany, another beloved disciple. She has been a supplicant before; when she desired to listen to Jesus teaching; when her brother died and she touched Jesus' heart with her weeping. But this time, we see Mary ministering to Jesus. Her anointing is an act of pure extravagance; Judas, protesting, tries to force an either/or division-either one can love Jesus or one can love the poor. But Jesus refutes Judas by affirming the kind of both/and love that Mary has shown. It is perfectly possible to love both; this is a false and ungenerous dichotomy.

This is a very personal story, yet its beauty and intimacy should not blind us to its wider significance. Mary is anointing Jesus for a bitter and untimely death which both accept as the likely outcome of his challenge to the religious authority of Jerusalem. Her declaration for Jesus is offered to him publicly while he still lives. Her loving act makes visible the violence to which Jesus is to be subjected. She is a model of resistance to violence through the love that acts. It is also a participation in Jesus' suffering and death, a mark of identification with Jesus' passion. Mary does for Jesus now what he will do for his disciples later. *We strain to glimpse his mercy-seat, and find him kneeling at our feet.*

Mary anticipates the commandment that Jesus will give his followers. 'Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.' She models discipleship. It is an open invitation not just to talk about love, as Judas did, but to **be** the reminder, in our concrete decisions and actions, that if we have not love, we are nothing. The theologian, Kosuke Koyama, writes:

'What is love if it remains invisible and intangible?Grace cannot function in a world of invisibility. Yet in our world, the rulers try to make invisible the alien, the orphan, the hungry and thirsty, the sick and imprisoned. This is violence. Their bodies must remain visible. There is a connection between invisibility and violence. People, because of the image of God they embody, must remain seen. Faith, hope and love are not vital except in what is seen. Religion seems to raise up the invisible and despise what is visible. But it is the 'see, hear, touch' gospel that can nurture the hope which is free from deception.'

This is love, not as sentiment, but as a deep resistance to all that does violence to, demeans or degrades other human beings. It is also about receiving as well as giving. Jesus' acceptance of, and refusal to condemn Mary's gift is also a gift of love. Finally, Jesus himself becomes the supplicant, giving dignity and grace to vulnerability and need. This is the way we are to be with one another, a way grounded firmly on mutual exchange, acceptance and respect for one another in all our difference, our frailty, our unexpressed and unmet need.

The rejoicing of a private and exclusive community fails to invite all to hope. That is not the gospel. Hope with all creation and rejoice with all creation! What a far-reaching horizon! This horizon is not a hallucination. For God, no one is stranger. We cannot love our neighbours unless we are open to being loved by our neighbours. We cannot extend hospitality to strangers unless we accept hospitality from strangers. The gospel upholds this two – way traffic. One – way traffic breeds self – righteousness. (Kosuke Koyama)

The Scottish poet, Robert Burns, wrote, 'O, wad some poo'er the giftie gie us, tae see ourselves as ithers see us.' And 'Do for others what you would have them do for you', said Jesus This is two-way traffic; to see ourselves from the perspective of the other, and to extend to the other the same generosity and kindness that we wish to receive. 'Removing all traces of racism from our relations means affirming that we are different and that we shall remain different'. (*Edgar Pisani*) Affirming the right of the 'not us' to be different is a huge responsibility, especially when we are in the majority, and have more choice in the matter; minorities often have to make do with the small space for expression of difference assigned to them. And this task is all the more challenging because we also have to discern what differences really **are** threatening and to resist all efforts to whip up hysteria about the rest. Our freedoms are not at risk in Europe. Our attachment to our own comforts are much more of a threat.

To see ourselves as others see us from the beach, not the terrace, is not comfortable. Racism depends on the dehumanisation of the 'not us'. But it's also learned from the experience of racism. We must resist every effort to scapegoat and stigmatise, to divide into 'us' and 'them'. Racism makes 'human' the least important definition. The gospel makes it the most important.

Ruth was assimilated; the Canaanite woman was affirmed in her difference. These strategies we are familiar with in Europe. But Mary anointed Jesus into identification with the 'not-us', the minority, the supplicants. I want to finish with another story. A couple of weeks ago, I was in South Africa, visiting a church in the black township of Guguletu with which the Iona Community has a partnership. Its minister studied for a while in Scotland, and there heard a woman member of the Iona Community

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she speak. She told of how, as a child in rural Scotland, some traveller children had come to her school. Travellers are those who used to be known as gypsies, close relatives of the Roma of other parts of Europe, and they attract the same stigma, abuse and discrimination in Scotland. She described how she would stand at the school window, in tears at the sight of these children being bullied, taunted and pushed about. Then one day, she realised that it was not enough to weep. She had to leave her window, go over to where the traveller children were, and stand beside them. My South African friend had been very moved by this story-it had changed his understanding of his own ministry, and turned it into a quite remarkable and unusual one of service to and solidarity with people in his own very poor community living with HIV/AIDS – another group who have experienced much discrimination and prejudice, not least from fellow Christians.

It was for me a vivid demonstration of the 'see, hear, touch' gospel, of the journey from assimilation through multiculturalism to solidarity with the poorest and most vulnerable which Jesus himself made, and invites us to make too. And it was a great example of how women taking on responsibility to shape the world create ripples that cross boundaries, cross continents and bear witness to a different way of being.