

Prayer for our Daughters

Genesis 32:22-31

Luke 18:1-8

Sunday 16th October 2022 at All Saints Kings Heath, celebrating the Baptism of Emma Noakes

What are we to pray for our daughters? We can't predict their future, but maybe articulating that might sketch out some of the contours of hope and fear as we peer ahead and try to equip them with navigation skills for whatever they will encounter.

It's not an unassailably binary question, but it's one for today as a baby girl is brought for baptism, a ceremony enacting and embodying some of her parents' hopes as they imagine the landscape ahead; a question for a week when women and girls in Iran have bravely cried "get lost" to thuggish, shady enforcers, and as our third female Prime Minister bleakly proves progress in gender equality by being as capricious, disloyal and self-serving as her male predecessor. Just like him she is apparently unembarrassed by the untethered, loud assertions of the past two months, discarded like rancid litter on the ground behind her. Meanwhile a woman appears in today's reading calling angrily for justice and her pleas are ignored by the male establishment.

This is the second time Luke has introduced a woman of the city who forces the male gaze to focus on her. The first woman was real, she anointed Jesus' feet in a tender encounter. There sexual assumptions were made by the man in power and Jesus challenged him to read her differently. Here the woman is a character in one of Jesus' provocative stories. Far from tender, she is angry and the judge thinks potentially violent. Our translation is too tame. The Greek for "bothering" is a boxing term. He is afraid he'll get a black eye. Moreover, she doesn't only want justice. Again, the Greek also means revenge.

Alarmingly, Jesus purges any tenderness from this story so we don't even get to like the downtrodden character. Jesus exposes a comical truth: that sometimes people do the right thing for the wrong reason. When we plead in victimhood and when we wield great power, we are not necessarily pleasant. Even so, we sometimes manage accidentally to get things right. Having played out that drama, Jesus invites us to contrast both Judge and Widow with God who, full of compassion, with high regard for humanity, higher than we deserve, will always respond to our cries, whether we are pleasant or not.

In both of these encounters, Jesus draws the objectifying male gaze onto women, then refocuses it into an honouring, upholding and vindicating gaze. He makes them our teachers. Objectifying becomes beholding. Contempt gives way to dignity. A place of lustful or neglectful belittling becomes a safe space.

Our Old Testament reading introduces us to a needy man, Jacob, whose craving for affirmation has led to serious mistakes, betraying his brother Esau and leading to his own isolation. His angst this particular night is because he is about to try and make up with his brother by sending lots of presents to soften him up before he arrives to face his wrath. But the craving for affirmation is not altogether wrong. He longs for divine blessing – which is the deepest human need be we male,

female, non-binary – but Jacob rather spoils it by trying to grab it. (Hilariously, by the way, the women in his life run rings around him, just as his Mother did Isaac.)

The needs expressed in all these stories are a mixture of noble and shabby, understandable and distorted, tender and harsh. That's humanity for you. They do, without generalising, alert us to differences between conditions and opportunities for men and women down the centuries.

In the widow's tale, Jesus makes his hearers consider the tradition they claim as descendants of Moses. Widows are given particular attention by the Mosaic law because their circumstances leave them particularly vulnerable. There is fierce curse on any who deny widows justice. (Deuteronomy 27:19) Why then does this widow not get an answer? Why does she have to raise her voice?

The very public appearance of both Luke's persistent women of the city invites real confidence in the faith identity of women in the public square. (So assert Amy-Jill Levine and Ben Witherington in their Jewish-Christian commentary.) Their necessary persistence is a judgement on the flabbiness and neglect of the male dominated institutions.

How much have things changed since then? What fears must still shape our prayers for Emma and her generation? The girls of Iran are showing the Emperor has no clothes. If we're tempted to be superior, the Magdalen Laundries tell a despicable Christian tale of forgetfulness of the re-focussing Jesus and Luke required of the male gaze. On a day of celebration and thanksgiving for her bright little life, and the very fact of giving birth embodying human hope, I don't want to dwell in detail on the violence, the police chauvinism, the hideous statistics, but at least we acknowledge that as Baptised people who dwell on the example of Jesus we cannot hide from those realities. Our ceremony will shortly name the "evil," "deceit and corruption" of which misogyny is an aspect. But we do not stay fixated by them. We trust the God of mercy will take us through and beyond them and show us a bigger horizon.

So we focus on what hopes Baptism may trace for Emma and her parents, considering the world into which she has been born. One of the intriguing and unsettling things about parenthood is that we don't know what our daughter is going to be like, and whether, indeed, we will really like them. Will she be tender or harsh? What tastes will she evolve? Will she come home one day and say she's delivering leaflets for a political party we can't stand? We don't know. All we can do is prayerfully try to make the conditions in which she will flourish and be her best self. In baptism we declare our belonging in a community of faith of staggering diversity, especially diversity of personality. Our scriptures hold our unerring gaze on human complexity, idiosyncrasy, angularity. In them, all kinds of people approach God and receive loving attention.

To this day it's also a community that is candid about the nature of faith. Jacob's new God-given name Israel means "Struggles with God" It becomes the name for a whole people, among whom Jesus would be born.

It's a community that, in this symbolic washing, insists there is a fresh start with God every day. In this symbolic burial and resurrection insists that in God, no mistake cannot be turned into an opportunity and even death is not the end of our story. In this anointing, we insist that even when others don't like Emma or, more importantly, when she doesn't like herself, God has chosen to be

with her through thick and thin and to make her a gift to the world around her. This ceremony is a celebration of God's belief in her. It's a community that brings the week's experience into the fellowship to turn things over in the light of the astonishingly candid, provocative scriptures, which firmly forbid romanticising men or women and constantly help us re-focus our gaze, male on female, female on male, anyone on anyone.

Sometimes, Emma may feel prayer is like banging on the door until your knuckles bleed. That's one of the admissions in Jesus' story. While ultimately reminding us that God is not as grumpy and resentful as we suppose, the story does acknowledge how hard faith can be for us. Sometimes, prayer feels all too up close and personal, like a wrestling match. Most of the time it will be a bit boring. But always, God hears and will respond.

But Jesus, whom Luke portrays as needing to pray often, also needed people around him. Luke and John introduce some of them. Mary and Martha are two of his best friends, bringing tenderness, argumentative affection, intellect and practical care to his life. They lived in Bethany. The gospels show Bethany to be a safe place for him. (Luke 10, John 11) It's where he often dined and talked, grieved and reflected. It's the place he chose to say goodbye to the disciples when he finally ascended to heaven. So I wonder if Emma's middle name can be a gentle reminder through her life of just how intimate God's fellowship is. If God desires our company, it's the most natural thing in the world to desire God's. If Jesus craved safe space, it's the most natural thing for Emma to desire it with him. If in that space, we're free to argue lovingly like Mary and Martha of Bethany, we will be able to face the world with courage and hope.

Let's be frank, Emma will have to navigate the inappropriate male gaze in her life. We are so far from out of the woods on that one. But, Baptised, she should rest assured that this not the too gaze that defines her. It is Jesus' gaze in which she is fully, entirely known and cherished and in which she will grasp fullness of life. Our prayer for this daughter today is that the church be the Bethany space she needs and in turn she may help the church be that space for others, especially for any on whom the world's gaze is contemptuous, cruel or objectifying.

And in answer to Jesus' wistful question "Will the Son of Man find faith on earth?" today with full hearts we can say "Yes, here, in Emma Bethany's hopeful family."