

REAL LIFE: KNOWING YOUR RIGHTS

A lady once told me of the time when she asked a Minister to pray for her husband.
(You are never going to believe this but it is true)

Alice and her family moved into a new area and, being a Christian family, they went along to the nearest church, hoping to find a “spiritual home.” The people there were not very friendly but the family persisted until, after some months Alice’s husband became seriously ill with pneumonia. This was in the days when the drugs were not that brilliant and she was frantically worried about him. So the next Sunday, coming out of church, she plucked up the courage to speak to the Minister.

Please, she said, would you pray for my husband who is very seriously ill?

That was all she asked. She did not expect a visit or even a few sympathetic words at the church door. The Minister drew himself up and looked down on her.

Do I know you, he said? And that was it.

I blushed for him. How could he have been so rude? None of us are perfect in our ministry. We all make mistakes. We seldom offer as much pastoral care to people as we would like to because of pressures of time or being unaware of their real needs. But this was a deliberate attitude problem. This Minister truly believed that his care should be only for those “official” members of his particular church and that he had no duty whatsoever even to pray for anyone he did not know.

Religion has often been like that. It has segregated people into the “known” and the “unknown,” the “in” and the “out.” And if you think that Minister was rude and uncaring, then what did you think of Jesus and his friends in our Gospel story today? *Send that foreign woman away and tell her to stop bothering us,* said Jesus’ disciples, when this desperate mother kept asking him to heal her daughter.

And what did Jesus say when she finally caught up with him? *I can’t take the children’s bread* (meaning his own people) *and throw it to the dogs* (that is, to foreigners). How rude is that? If I had said it, I would have lost my job and been taken to court for racial discrimination. You can see why some people insist that religion brings out the worst in human beings and not the best.

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We do need to understand that when this Gospel story was written down no-one would have been particularly shocked because that was the way society and religion worked. It was the age of the Roman Empire: those who had Roman citizenship and those who did not would have lived totally separate lives. Roman citizens would have enjoyed a high standard of human rights. Non-citizens would have had no rights at all. It would have been like blacks and whites in America before Martin Luther-King. And in the Jewish religion, it was only those of Jewish families who were seen as God’s chosen people, with a right to God’s blessing. Those who were not Jews had no such rights at all.

When the Christian church started it was at first made up entirely of Jewish men and women who had accepted Jesus Christ as their Saviour promised by God. When non-Jews came along, claiming to believe in Jesus as the Son of God and wanting to join the church, there was hell to pay. It caused a real crisis of conscience among the first Christians. In a society which was segregated and in a religion which had always been

his rights and his brothers had none. They had broken all the rules of family loyalty years before when they had sold their own flesh and blood into slavery. They had no right to expect help from him in their crisis of famine; they had no right even to expect their freedom. In Joseph's position he could order their imprisonment or even execution and no-one would stand in his way. He had the right to take revenge and they knew it.

In the film "Schindler's List" Otto Schindler hears the Commander of a Concentration Camp boasting that he now has the legal right to shoot on the spot any man, woman or child in that camp. He has this degree of power over human life.

Yes, says Schindler. You have the power to kill. But it is when you have that power and choose not to exercise it that you are truly strong.

Joseph knew his rights as a powerful leader in the Egyptian Government.

He knew his rights as a family man who had been betrayed by his own brothers.

But he also now knew his rights as a child of God. As a child of God he had the right to forgive, the right to be reconciled to those who had hurt him. He had the power to kill but he chose not to exercise it. And that was when he showed his true strength.

We all have the right to be children of God but at many times in our lives we betray his love and loyalty. We let him down- big time. But God is great enough to choose to forgive, to keep looking for reconciliation. That was the message Jesus taught- in what he said, in the way he lived and in how he died.

And if God is big enough to forgive, then we, as children of God, have it in us to be big enough too. Our right to be a child of God can make us great enough to set aside what some might call our own "human rights" for the sake of the greater good. We are not governed by personal greed and the thirst for vengeance. We are inspired by the hope of justice and peace for all. There can be a difference between "knowing your rights" in the political and social sense and "knowing your rights" as a Christian.

Today Donna and James have claimed the right for Amelia to be a child of God. They have brought her into this church of God's people and it is now for them and for us to teach her "her rights:" the right to be loved by God, led by God, cared for by God; the right to faith and to a faith community; the right to be forgiven and to forgive; the right to receive and to give; the right to live life and to give life. May she, like Joseph, be able to look back at her life, see the generosity of God to her and have the grace to be generous to others.

And so be it for us all. Amen.