

Pentecost 14 – 17 August 2008 – The Rev. Dr. Guy J.D. Collins

May I speak in the name of God, Giver, Forgiver and Lover. Amen.

Earlier this week I discovered that we had an exhibitionist in the family. Our daughter Lyra who is three and a half years old had unknowingly to me or my wife been exhibiting some of her art work. If we had known we might have taken the time to view her brush strokes. But as it was, we found out only later that along with other preschoolers her art had been on display in the Hanover public library.

My wife and I are fairly familiar with receiving pieces of art back from her child care and I have to say that this particular piece had all the usual marks of our daughter. It was a broad abstract piece, the kind of thing you see hanging in Mass MOCA or Tate Britain. Somewhat like a Mark Rothko it used to great effect one color with just a few variations of depth. Normally when seeing her work I, like the churl that I am, make encouraging noises and then consign it to the fridge. However, on receiving back her piece with a certificate of public exhibition from the Hanover library I looked at it a second time, and my excitement was so great that as you can gather I am telling anyone who will care to listen, and even those who might not.

Something about that official certificate changed the way that I received the painting. And by extension it changed the way I saw my daughter.

In the same way, I was struck earlier this week with another example of exhibitionism. Specifically, the amazing gymnastic abilities of the teams currently competing at the Beijing Olympics. Like millions of others I have been rooting for Team GB, but just occasionally the coverage on the major news networks has revealed the fortunes of another

national team. It was in one of those segments that I watched the astonishing feats of the young girls of Team USA. And again, what struck me was less the astounding athletic prowess, but more the reception of the gymnasts. In particular, how at the end of each girl's performance the camera followed the girl into the arms of the middle aged woman who was one of their coaches. Regardless of whether the routine had been a success or whether it had not worked out so well the coach took each girl into her arms, then kissed her and finally spoke words of either consolation or delight.

There was something profoundly liturgical about those embraces, kisses and words. And when the whole team had finished all the girls joined in a circle in another almost religious act. Thanks to the intrusiveness of the camera we could hear each one of them encouraging and thanking the others. I have to admit I was flabbergasted. Somehow through the warmth of the coach and the circle time, the gymnasts overturned all my preconceptions about the exhibitionism of gymnastics. What for me was a sport about individual attainment became instead a transformative affirmation of the power of mutual care and support. For while they were alone on the high bars, when they had their feet on the ground the gymnasts were to all intents and purposes to be working together.

In the Gospel story we see another episode in which preconceptions are challenged and perspectives broadened. At first sight it is a traditional story in which Jesus opens the eyes of the disciples. But the story is actually a lot more complex than that. For the story is really about how the unimportant foreigner, the alien woman, comes to change the mind of Jesus.

In many of the gospel narratives Jesus is firmly at the centre of the story. But with the encounter with the Canaanite woman, it is not Jesus who leads us so much as the outsider, someone one with no credentials and no teaching authority.

But like the pieces of art that are worth millions because of their connection to an important name, so the Canaanite woman's connection to the name of Jesus ensures her story survived. To us she is nameless. And to the disciples she was a disturbing annoyance to be sent away. A feeling that even Jesus appears to have shared for a while.

But thanks to her persistence and thanks to her physically kneeling in pleading at his feet, she is able to jog the mind of Jesus.

It is extraordinary to think that the Gospel writers allowed this kind of story in to their official accounts. After all it doesn't exactly place the disciples or Jesus in a particularly favorable light. And yet that ironically is exactly what gives it authority and a ring of truth.

Thanks to the Canaanite woman we witness the evolution within Jesus's ministry from concern for his own tribe to a more global ministry. Unfortunately even at the cusp of the twenty first century most of us are still operating within the parameters of our own forms of tribalism. Like the disciples we too prefer to see the outsiders kept at arms length. And like them we are culturally predisposed to identify with those like us rather than those different from us.

My own pet theory is that sport is often a wonderful way of asserting tribalism in the modern world. But religion, politics and education are just as important tribal groupings today.

If we are to learn anything from the current Olympics I think it will be less about who is the fastest and who is the strongest. Instead I think it will be to discover that for all our twenty-first tribalism, humans are fundamentally similar. We rejoice when we win, and we cry when we lose.

Like the woman who quizzed Jesus we need to learn to be advocates for others. And like her we need to question the authorities of this world that tell us that our current tribalisms require us to stay separate from one another. The task of questioning our contemporary tribalisms begins with translating Canaan into say, China, or the Holy City of Jerusalem into Hanover. But we are also asked to see just who the Canaanite woman is in our local context. As previous generations worked out the truth of the story in their own terms so can we. A particularly timely example of this in its 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary year is L.M. Montgomery's *Anne of Green Gables*, a work that famously inspired and continues to inspire generations of women with the story of an inquisitive orphan.

Both Montgomery and the gospels remind us how important truths are often spoken from those whom conventional wisdom counts as powerless and without authority. But as Jesus listened to such outsiders, so today we have to listen and learn from both unlikely exhibitionism and undervalued intuition. Amen.