

It's Just Not Natural!

Sermon for the 12th Sunday after Pentecost, Year A, 20 August 2023

St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor ACT Australia

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Isaiah 56:1, 6-8; Psalm 67; Romans 11:13-32; Matthew 15:21-28

+In the Name of the Father & of the Son & of the Holy Spirit. AMEN.

I'm going to start today by giving my best impression of being a cranky, disagreeable person—some might say that would come quite naturally. So, here goes ...

It's just not natural!

It's just not natural that women should get uppity, that they should question traditional sex roles, or expect the gender pay gap to be closed, or seek ordination, or indeed to challenge men's right to impregnate them. It's just not natural!

It's just not natural when gays and lesbians think that they're just like everybody else—indeed, that they're just as good as decent, respectable people. As if it's alright for men to be sexually passive, or

else to sexually dominate other men in place of women. Or as if it's alright for some women to have a sex life free of men. And don't get me started on same-sex marriage! It's almost as bad as men selling out to become women, or women thinking they can become men. It's just not natural!

Likewise, it's just not natural when foreign immigrants take what's ours—especially Asians and Arabs, just like all those Southern and Eastern Europeans did after the war. And don't get me started on black and brown people, especially indigenous people. They should be grateful—we've carried the white man's burden on their behalf, and now they want a Voice to lord it over us. And what next? It's just not natural!

But wait a minute. Just what is 'natural'? Too often the natural is just the conventional, and the preservation of established privilege, which changes from age to age. And we're beginning to catch on. Once women's sport was a sideshow, but last Wednesday night saw up to eleven million of us tuned in to cheer on the Matildas. Once the love of same-sex couples dared not speak its name, because it was unnatural. But now we know that it's a perfectly natural albeit a minority part of our rich human experience, like left-handedness. Likewise, without necessarily buying into every ideological extreme, we're beginning to realise that gender isn't always reducible to a

simple binary—that what’s natural in matters of gender, as with sexuality, has to be discovered, not insisted on with the aid of a big stick. As for race, there’s been a long struggle against white supremacy throughout the West—and especially in America, which can’t acknowledge its guilt over two and a half centuries of chattel slavery, and which dare not allow blacks too much sway at the ballot box. That would disrupt the stable natural order of things. How dare they claim that Black Lives Matter as much as blue lives, let alone white lives?

And, friends, even here in Australia the old racial superiority of white over black, long thought to be the natural order of things, dies hard, as desperately anxious champions of the ‘No’ case are amply demonstrating. Yet we have much to learn from indigenous cultures, for instance about living in harmony with the environment, while we in the West show our respect for what’s natural by destroying as much of it as we can.

Now, if we’ve begun to question this equating of our biases with what’s natural—if we’ve become more attuned to human equality, human rights, human self-determination—is that because we’ve thrown off the harsh authoritarian yoke of religion, as modern children of the Enlightenment? This is a common enough assessment, after all. But our readings this morning tell a different

story. Today's readings all celebrate God's merciful outreach to the nations—but this generosity emerges, it overflows, from God's prior commitment to beloved Israel. So, generosity and inclusion and the welcoming of difference represent something more than just progressive, left-wing self-congratulation. Instead, this humanistic breakthrough actually comes from the Bible, and from our God who overturns the natural in favour of the unnatural.

St Paul reminds us in Romans today that we gentiles—we non-Jews—have been welcomed into God's family in Jesus Christ on the back of Israel's covenant, which has never been revoked: as he puts it, "it's not you that supports the root, but the root that supports you." And here he echoes both Isaiah and our Psalm today. Isaiah, after Judah's return from foreign exile, finds it in himself to be generous to foreign nations, declaring that Israel's God loves universally. Likewise Psalm 67 announces God's blessing to the nations—yet the psalmist praises Israel's God for this blessing, rather than some good-natured generic divinity: "That *your* ways may be known on earth: *your* liberating power among all nations".

And none of this is 'natural'. St Paul today makes it clear that Israel is God's first and inalienable love, even if many in Israel are unresponsive. So, God shares some of that unrequited love with us, who aren't Jewish. And listen to his language about what is and isn't

natural: “you have been cut from what is by nature a wild olive tree and grafted, contrary to nature, into a cultivated olive tree...”. Hear that? It’s contrary to nature that you and I are here today, giving thanks for the grace of God that’s found us and established us in God’s family, which goes back to Moses and Abraham, in which we have no natural claim of blood or ancestry.

And so we come to today’s gospel passage of the Canaanite woman, which gives us a window into how this inclusion of gentiles played out in the church where Matthew’s gospel originated—a church thought to be primarily Jewish. Jesus is portrayed as reluctant to help this woman, only then to be won over by her wit as much as her faith. This provides a role model for Christians whenever there’s doubt about who gets a seat at the table. And because Jesus is portrayed as initially reluctant, we see that the difficulty of these changes, these new arrivals, is being acknowledged. This is surely helpful.

So, here’s this pushy, mouthy woman, and an indigenous woman at that—a descendent of those original inhabitants of Canaan before Israel arrived, and indeed who’d fought frontier wars with Israel. She fronts Jesus bold as brass: like a Palestinian woman demanding entry at an Israeli checkpoint, or like Rosa Parks claiming that bus seat in Montgomery, Alabama, in 1955, or like Senator Lidia Thorpe fronting

the National Press Club last week. None of these women are necessarily welcome arrivals, but they're persistent, with the Canaanite women presented in the gospel as teaching Jesus a thing or two—there's no place for her at the table maybe, but even the dogs might expect a few scraps.

The Canaanite woman ignores Jesus's mansplaining and stakes her claim on the grace of God—a grace that's evident to her in the story of Israel, so why can't she and her little girl have some of that? Why not indeed? And Jesus is won over. But he's not a woke liberal, he doesn't betray the traditional faith of Israel, he just sees to the heart of it, so that something unexpected happens, and against the order of nature—that is, against the deeply entrenched and near-irresistible forces of wilfully blinded self-interest that make the world go round.

So, friends, our gift and our challenge here in the Eucharist is to recognise and to claim this unnatural state-of-affairs for our own—to know ourselves as gifted and engrafted rather than naturally entitled. And precisely this breakthrough insight frees us to be genuinely large-souled, genuinely welcoming of others, regardless of claims that 'it's just not natural'. And a good place to start would be on Referendum Day.

The Lord be with you ...