

# A tapestry of colour

Chine McDonald reflects on racism and Scripture.

**For many black people around the world – particularly those who exist in white majority spaces and countries – the death of George Floyd felt horrifying, yet horrifyingly familiar. It signified the oppression, brutality and violence that had marked the black experience for centuries. I for one felt a sense of vicarious trauma as I watched George Floyd's death. This sense of vicarious trauma was not just an individual one, but the collective trauma of a whole community of people: black people the world over.**

In the account found in Matthew 15 of an ethnic Canaanite woman – a Syrophenician woman in Mark 7 – asks Jesus to deliver her demon-possessed daughter from evil. Here we see an example not too dissimilar from the present day in which there is enmity between people groups. This woman is brown and is also a Gentile. Her people have long been excluded from the chosen ones. And yet she believes in Jesus. She believes that he can heal her daughter. She believes that he might – despite who she is and where she is from – listen to her cries and pay attention to who she is.

I have always found this passage awkward. First, it's the fact that Jesus initially outright ignores her. He doesn't reply at all. It feels so out-of-character for Jesus to ignore someone who wants his help. You can perhaps picture the tension in this scene. The disciples urge Jesus to send her away because she keeps calling out to them. They would likely have had strong prejudices against the woman because of her ethnic background. Jesus then tells her that he was only sent to the lost sheep of Israel and adds: 'It is not right to take the children's bread and toss it to the dogs.'

For centuries, black people have been likened to animals, in cultures where whiteness is seen as superior. In 1900, slave owner Charles Carroll wrote a delightfully-titled pamphlet: *The Negro a Beast, or In the Image of God*. He argued, he believed on the basis of Scripture, that black people were not in fact humans. That they were some lesser being. Perhaps this was the only way such a long history of oppression against black people could be justified. Maybe they weren't people at all.

So, it is shocking to us that Jesus might refer to this woman and her community as 'dogs'. And yet, as is often the way with Jesus, not all is as it seems. I am not one of those who believes that this passage in Scripture suggests that Jesus was a racist and that the woman's faith made him not racist. I believe he is being typically provocative, reflecting the society back on itself. Because elsewhere in the New Testament, Jesus' invitation into relationship with God is an expansive one, encompassing those with different statuses in society, different backgrounds.



Canaanite woman (by Ally Barrett)

In the aftermath of the Black Lives Matter protests arising following the death of George Floyd, it felt like the world – including the Church in the UK – was paying attention to racial injustice. I was invited to write several articles, to speak at countless events, to share my experiences of these injustices as a black woman existing in white majority contexts. At times it felt cathartic to do so, and at times it felt like I was reliving a lifetime of trauma and taking on the generational trauma of my ancestors. But yet, it is something that we all needed to do – to confront racism that is within our own churches.

It's not necessarily a racism that is made manifest in violence, death and oppression, but perhaps in microaggressions and merely being ignored. White supremacy does not necessarily come in literal chains and shackles, but in monochrome theology, leadership and worship that barely masks a belief that whiteness is closest to godliness. Somewhere along the road, the predominantly white Church in the UK has believed that Christianity itself is white, European and even British, and that all other cultures are invited to the table. Why else would most of our theology books, hymns and songs be written by white European men? But Christianity at its heart is radically welcoming. The Church should be like a mosaic – a tapestry of colour in which all are invited in. Whether or not our churches exist in racially diverse geographical locations, we can take practical steps to combat the idea that white people are the chosen ones, rethinking our storytelling, the music we choose, the images we share. In this way, we can demonstrate that God is a God who loves each of us, no matter our backgrounds – without exception.

*Chine McDonald is a writer, broadcaster and author of *God Is Not a White Man: And Other Revelations* (Hodder & Stoughton, May 2021).*

*This is an abbreviated version of Chine's article. The full article, including some 'next steps' suggestions, is on the [WEB](#).*