

Address “Can we really hack the Jesus pace”

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A couple of months ago we were at our niece’s wedding reception in Cairo and we heard about how the actual legal part had gone. In essence it was overseen by the local Mosque sheik and the paper-work was a property transaction where the leading man in the bride’s family, in this case her younger brother because her father isn’t an Egyptian citizen signed her over to the groom. She had to confirm that she wasn’t being coerced into it and that was her only part in things. The sheik then took the completed paperwork to the secular legal office where it was all registered and made legal. It was really rather like a traditional wedding here where the bride’s father gives her away to the groom.

That giving away tradition is becoming less common, but when I have been interviewing a couple and they have said they want the bride’s father to walk her up the aisle and give her away, I have often asked them whether the groom’s mother was going to give him away?

Anyway soon after we got home from Cairo we were talking about marriage and gay marriage and the Church’s attitude about it to friends of ours and finding out about the history of marriage and when the Church started to become involved in it (which was about 8 or 9 hundred years ago in England). The Church seemed to want to take marriage under its wing, so to speak, so it could have a lot of influence on the politics of alliances between countries that were sealed by a young royal from one country marrying another young royal from another country. The Church defined marriage as a sacrament for the simple worldly reason of controlling the politics of Europe.

Anyway it was fairly obvious that in general the norm has been for society to be firmly patriarchal. Women have usually been seen to be the property of men and at times polygamy was acceptable, and only controlled really by the ability of a man to finance a whole lot of wives. Polyandry where a woman had more than one husband has been very uncommon.

Things have varied of course. An example that is relatively close to home is our niece’s grandfather on her mum’s side. He was married to her grandmother when he was at school and she was really just a girl. He went to Eton and then Oxford University and while he was there his young wife became mature, probably when she was about 13 and then they assumed proper married life so to speak.

I guess that sort of situation could happen here now and possibly does where immigrants come in as children already married and then take up married life long before they are our legal age of consent of 16.

Marriage and relations between the sexes are a source of so much interest and sometimes challenges. There was the publicised case of two women who came over from Australia to be married here. All was well until they were home in Aussie and they fell out and wanted a divorce. As their marriage wasn't recognised in Aussie, they couldn't get a divorce over there and at least one of them would have to come back here and reside here for a while to get a divorce. One of the women wanted to marry a man, which was fine, she could do that in Australia, but she had better never come to NZ unless she could be prosecuted for bigamy.

There is the same sort of confusion and tensions in the Bible as we have today. The obvious one is the reference in Paul's letters and in Acts to women being leaders in the early Church. Tabitha a woman from Joppa is referred to as a disciple. Mary the mother of Mark hosted a house church where Peter took refuge after his miraculous escape from prison. Lydia hosted Paul. Nympha hosted a church. Priscilla and Aquila are mentioned together as wife and husband many times. Men and women together are greeted by Paul at the end of his letter to the church in Rome as if the women were regarded as equal to the men. Mary Magdalene seems to have been a very central person in Jesus' life and probably in the early church. Yet as we know Paul said that women should cover their heads in church and not speak. "women are to be silent in the churches. They are not permitted to speak, but must be in submission, as the Law says. If they wish to inquire about something, they are to ask their own husbands at home; for it is dishonourable for a woman to speak in the church". Leave out the word "church" and that sounds very like the position of Saudi women today.

There were many tensions in the early church, I would say far more, and more significant ones actually than we have today and I believe the position of women in leadership roles was one of them.

Now the reading from Luke's Gospel.

Mary is sitting at Jesus' feet and talking to him, and Martha is out in the kitchen getting dinner and complaining that her sister should be helping her. Jesus takes Mary's side and says sitting and talking to him was the better thing to do.

In the past I have taken this pretty literally and being a man could put myself in Jesus' position and of course I would go all soft over a woman doing what Mary did but not over Martha being fussy and domestic and that Martha wasn't a 1st century Nigella Lawson.

Saying this, albeit rather less directly, has never failed to get me in trouble with many ladies in the church who pointed out that being domestic was necessary and I would very soon feel hungry and be dependent on them while the Marys of this world would be pretty useless when the chips were down, or there were no chips at all I guess.

Excuse a frivolous comment please: Actually, maybe Jesus could have been said to have come to his senses with some help from a reality check from Martha, because just after this passage, a couple of verses later at the beginning of chapter 11 he teaches his apostles how to pray and right at the beginning he suggests they turn to God and ask him to "give us today our daily bread".

Being serious however, this time I looked at the work of the Jesus Seminar to see whether they considered that Jesus ever said this. They were strongly of the opinion that he didn't, so Marthas you are not standing condemned after all, maybe Jesus didn't prefer the dolly bird all wide eyed at his feet after all. But he was a man – but enough of that.

Just before this story about Martha and Mary there is the parable of the Good Samaritan. Luke almost certainly didn't put the Lord's Prayer after the incident with Mary and Martha to make the frivolous point I just made but I do think that the parable of the Good Samaritan and the Mary and Martha story are meant to go together. The parable of the Good Samaritan is telling Luke's hearers to not be prejudiced, and not assume that Samaritans had to be lesser people because they were Samaritans and had a rather different faith than the Jews.

Jesus was challenging traditional values and assumptions; I am convinced because he knew from experience that they were wrong.

Likewise here I think that Jesus may be doing the same thing, or if Jesus didn't say it, that Luke is challenging the conventional wisdom of the day. The assumed way of the world then was that a woman's place was in the kitchen, in the home, and it was the prerogative of men to be the talkers, the decision makers and leaders.

As I have already said that was challenged then, and women didn't all fit the submissive servant model. It hadn't been all that long since Cleopatra had ruthlessly taken over the rule of Egypt. Jesus, or Luke anyway, by putting these two stories together was telling the early Church that Jesus, its Lord that they should follow, was a challenger of social mores, he was a critic of what society took for granted, and specifically he pointed out that all people were to be valued and people were not to be judged by their race, their religion or their gender. All people were if you like created in the image of God.

We can say "what's so great about that?" but apparently things were different in Jesus' time. I will quote from Lloyd Geering when he gave a lecture "About time"

"Today we prize personal initiative, courage and the taking of risks. "Never venture, never win" we say. The ancient world saw it differently. New ideas, human initiative, the questioning of established custom, the challenging of the status quo, were thought to lead only to disaster and the loss of the idyllic life of the past which felt secure." So Jesus was very much an innovator, was far more outstanding in his teaching than we may think.

That challenging of the status-quo is something that the Church has probably been too scared to follow, or found it too challenging and too uncomfortable. The Jesus way is to stand back and be a critic of what people all around you take for granted, so see where change of attitude is necessary and then to brave the consequences and take the stand.

Above all Jesus was the man driven by the most lively conscience.

The role of the Church that it has largely lost sight of, in my opinion, is that it does not follow Jesus' lead and instead all too often lets convention and what is comfortable blind our conscience and the Church often ends up being one of the last groups of people to accept reforming change. That doesn't seem to be the way of Jesus, and that observation is one that should keep us on our toes for the Jesus pace is truly a demanding one.