

+In the Name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

Thomas Moore the much-loved Irish poet, satirist and songwriter wrote a poem in the year 1835, which he entitled: “Scene from a play, acted in Oxford, called “Matriculation”. The poem describes a young man coming up to Oxford, who is about to enter into the register so as to take an academic degree. From the time of the Subscription Act of 1571 until the 1850s, when new measures were passed to open up admission, entering the register entailed (among other things) subscribing to the Thirty-nine Articles of Religion, historic, defining statements of Anglican doctrine. Signing them was to some extent a formality, but it was also a test of admission that effectively excluded non-Anglicans.

In the poem’s first lines, we are told there is a boy sitting at a table with the Thirty-nine Articles before him, and that he is counting them as the Rt Rev Doctor Philpots enters. For your amusement, David has agreed to read the part of the boy, the young student, while I read the part of Doctor Philpots:

There, my lad, lie the Articles—(*boy begins to count them*) just thirty-nine—
No occasion to count—you’ve now only to sign.
At Cambridge where folks are less High-church than we,
The whole Nine-and-Thirty are lumped into three.
Let’s run o’er the items; --there’s Justification,
Predestination and Superogation,--
Not forgetting Salvation and Creed Athanasian,
Till we reach, at last, Queen Bess’s Ratification.
That’s sufficient—now, sign, --having read quite enough,
You “believe in the full and true meaning thereof.” (*Boy stares.*)
Oh, a mere form of words, to make things smooth and brief,--
A commodious and short make-believe of belief,
Which our Church has drawn up, in a form thus articular,
To keep out, in general, all who’re particular.
But what’s the boy doing? What! Reading all through,
And my luncheon fast cooling!—this never will do.
Boy (*poring over the Articles*):
Here are points which –pray, Doctor, what’s “Grace of Congruity”?
Doctor P. (*sharply*):
You’ll find out, young sir, when you’ve more ingenuity.
At present, by signing, you pledge yourself merely,
Whate’er it may be, to believe it sincerely.
Both in *dining* and *signing* we take the same plan—
First, swallow all down, then digest—as we can.
Boy (*still reading*):
I’ve to gulp, I see, St. Athanasius’ Creed,
Which, I’m told, is a very tough morsel indeed;
As he damns—
Doctor P. (*aside*):
Ay, and so would I, willingly, too,
All confounded particular young boobies, like you.
This comes of Reforming! All’s o’er with our land,
Nor perceive that our ever-revered Thirty-Nine

Were made, not for men to *believe*, but to *sign*.
(Exit Doctor P. in a passion).

Today's passage from the gospel of Matthew can be just as hard to swallow as the Thirty-nine Articles were for the boy matriculating. Jesus is on his way back from Nazareth, his hometown, where his friends and family had called into question his authority ('Who does he think he is?') having been astonished and angered by his teaching. And yet where ever Jesus goes, he is confronted with crowds demanding miracles and people begging for blessings and counting on his cures to rid them of their suffering. But the crowds do not see him for who he either. In the reading we heard, Jesus has ducked into a house in the district of Tyre, for a meal or at least a moment's reprieve from the crowds, who have been pressing against him constantly.

Before Jesus has a chance to relax or rest a Canaanite woman barges in and begins shouting for him to heal her afflicted daughter. Though the woman is clearly in need, Jesus appears to be unconcerned, even callous. At first he doesn't respond to her outburst at all. Then he says he has nothing to offer her sort because his mission is to his own people, and he has been sent only to the lost sheep of Israel. When she continues to raise a ruckus, he says: "It is not fair to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs."

Like I said, this passage is a tough morsel, one you might prefer to leave on the side of the plate. The story is not only distasteful because Jesus likens her to a dog, using a scornful term for gentiles like the Canaanites, who were religious heretics and social outcasts. It is also difficult because it requires us to look at Christ's identity and his mission in a new light. Jesus' encounter with the Canaanite woman is remarkable because she recognizes who Jesus is and that he is no run of the mill miracle-worker. So when she pleads for his help, asserting that even the dogs are fed from the crumbs that fall from Israel's table, she kneels down before him to beg mercy beseeching him as, "Lord, Son of David", that title reserved for Israel's Messiah.

In calling Jesus by his true title, the woman, a foreigner, has recognized what those all around Jesus have failed to see: that he is her Messiah, her redeemer, too. Because of the strength of this woman's conviction about who he is, Jesus extols her faith and he heals her daughter. From that moment onwards his mission is redefined. As a result of her faith, he will work to traverse all the old divisions and established boundaries. And his offer of salvation will be extended to include everyone—Jew *and* Gentile—not only as Israel's redeemer but as the redeemer of the whole world.

If the faith of the Canaanite woman insists that God's redeeming love is not just for the Jewish people but for all people, her included, then Thomas Moore's poem gently mocks the way in which we have excluded and included other people with statements of faith. The young boy is being included in the life of the University but is encouraged to do so by signing up to a "make believe" of belief. The instrument of his *inclusion*—the Thirty-nine Articles—are ironically the very means of *excluding* Roman Catholics, Dissenters, and Nonconformists from enjoying the same opportunities.

Historical formularies, such as the Thirty-nine Articles, and statements of belief, such as the creeds, play a strange role of including and excluding. Some were put to paper to incorporate new generations into the Christian community by helping them to discover what it is we must say if we are to adequately witness to God. Their purpose was to present the faith so it could

be learned and affirmed. Other statements of belief were drawn up in times of conflict. They bear the marks of the particular controversies and polemics they sought to negotiate so as to strengthen the tradition or to refute heresy. But that can make them sound anachronistic to us. Who hasn't felt, at one time or another, when reciting the Nicene Creed during the Eucharist, as if they were performing a "make-believe" of belief? Who hasn't found it a bit easier on occasion to say, "*We* believe" rather than "*I* believe" so as to be carried by the surety of others over those parts that cause us to stumble?

It can be a deep comfort to declare those words we have experienced first-hand as true and life giving. It can be a stirring call to conscience to reaffirm those creedal convictions that have shaped our identity. But it can also be devastatingly lonely, if you are shut out on the wrong side of right belief, fenced off from others by statements that seem to suppress wonder and inquiry rather than to spark them. So while statements of belief can enfold us in a tradition, including us within God's redeeming work and affirming our common identity as Christians, they retain the power to estrange and exclude. If and when that happens, hold onto stories like that of the Canaanite woman, which stand to show us who Jesus really is: the one can and will overcome every last boundary we might place on God's love. *Amen.*