

Cancelling Jesus?

Hespeler, 5 September 2021 © Scott McAndless

Proverbs 22:1-2, 8-9, 22-23, Psalm 125, James 2, Mark 7:24-37

There has been a lot of talk over the last few years about canceling. It is what happens when you have somebody who, for a long time, has been revered in the culture falls from their pedestal. Maybe they are an important historical figure or politician. Maybe they are a celebrated author or actor or businessperson. But then they do something. Maybe they tweet something intolerant or abusive or insensitive. Or maybe they treat somebody else in a way that just seems wrong.

And we all know what happens next. Word of this terrible offense spreads like wildfire through social media along with a rising tide of offense and condemnation. And once the tide has grown large enough, the repercussions begin and often we see the person who has committed the offense losing their platform or maybe their job or paying the price in some other significant way.

“Cancel Culture”

This phenomenon has been given the name of *cancel culture* in our modern times, which is a name that I will admit I have some trouble with. My problem with it is that people always seem to see *cancel culture* as something that other people do. But they never seem to see how their own activities of boycotting or demanding somebody’s resignation who they don’t agree with as effectively part of the same kind of culture. That tells me that, often the people who use this term are really only using it as a tool to put down people they disagree with and are not really trying to create a better culture.

But, for better or worse, the term does seem to have become a part our modern language. So maybe we ought to understand it and try to see what can be done with it. So let me suggest a bit of a case study.

A Case Study

Let me give you a real-life case of a very important and highly revered religious leader. I’m talking about the kind of guy that commands the love and devotion of millions. In fact, so much is he revered that many of those followers would think of him more as a God than as a man. And let’s say that I tell you that a very reliable report has come out that this man was in a twitter conversation with a woman of a different ethnic group. She had come to him and asked for his assistance with something really important to her and he turned her down.

But wait, that’s not the terrible part of the story. I mean, somebody might have all kinds of good reasons not to come to the aid of somebody in need. It might be a bad look, but it’s



not necessarily evil. No, it wasn't the fact that he turned her down, it was *how* he did it. What if he turned her down by tweeting back, **"Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs."**

Did he Just Call her a Dog?

Ouch, can you imagine what the cancellation brigade might do with a tweet like that? They would ask, and quite justly when you look at the context, "Didn't he just imply that the people of his own ethnicity have priority simply because of that ethnicity? Even more important, didn't he just call the people of her race dogs (which is a particularly insulting slur in that culture)? And finally, and the most damningly, isn't there a word for a female dog, a word you wouldn't even say in public? And didn't he just personally call her that?" Oh, I can just imagine the culture warriors going to work, spreading the news and doing whatever they can to cancel the person who would have tweeted such a thing.

So, what do you think about that particular case study? It's a big problematic, isn't it? It is especially problematic because, of course, you have all already figured out which public figure I am talking about here. I am talking about something which, according to the Gospel of Mark, Jesus actually said. And there really is very little question that that is what he meant.

Defending Jesus

This story of Jesus and the Syrophenician woman is one that is kind of inescapably problematic. It has been for a long time. One way you can know that is because, for a long time, people have been trying to defend Jesus and his words in the story. One of the common defenses that you will hear is that maybe Jesus didn't really mean it. You know, he just said it in order to test the woman, to see if she had enough faith to challenge him.

But I got to say, when it comes to defenses, that is a pretty thin one. After all, isn't it the same defense that you have heard so many times when a powerful executive or public figure gets caught doing something horrible like sexual harassment? "Oh," says the powerful man, "I was just testing her to see if she would do the right thing by turning me down." That's right, I think that most of us would be pretty skeptical about such an explanation if we heard it today, and I really think that it is no different in the case of Jesus.

A Racist Attitude?

So, what is going on in this story? Is Jesus reacting to this woman in a racist manner? I suspect the inescapable answer is probably yes. And I realized that that answer might mess with some of your understandings of who Jesus was and what he represented. We do confess, after all, that Jesus was the Son of God, the one through whom God was and is uniquely present in this world. And yet, at the same time, we also confess that Jesus was and is fully human. And, given that that is a logical inconsistency, we do sometimes have a bit of trouble putting those two confessions together.

After all, we consider, if Jesus was fully divine then he must have known everything. That means that he must have known that it was racially insensitive and offensive to suggest that that woman was a dog. He must have known how that would have felt to her. That is actually a

misunderstanding of the divinity of Jesus as presented in the Gospels, where Jesus is not presented as being omniscient. But that is how we tend to think of it all the same.

And yet, at the same time, as someone who was fully human, Jesus grew up in the world, in Nazareth of Galilee, where he doubtlessly heard people putting down other people because of their ethnicity. And if, his whole life, Jesus had heard his parents and every person in his life that he respected casually refer to Syrophoenicians as dogs, would it not be the perfectly human thing to just casually pick up such attitudes and ways of speaking? Of course it is! I know that is what it is to be human because that is exactly what happens to each and every one of us as we grow up and uncritically adopt similar attitudes.

A Sinless Christ

So, I really don't feel as if it is all that surprising that Jesus should have picked up certain racial prejudices or attitudes. After all, the Bible does teach that Jesus was tested and tempted just like any of us, and yet was without sin. And so, having been exposed to such attitudes, he could well have carried them with him at least until such time as he was exposed to a living and breathing Syrophoenician. It is only at that point, I would suggest, that acting on such a prejudice would be a sin.

So the question is, if Jesus was fed racist attitudes by the society that raised him, why wouldn't his initial reaction just have been to act on those attitudes? And if that's what Jesus was doing, should he be canceled for that? No. I would say this not just for Jesus but for anyone who has been in that kind of situation. And I suspect we've all been in that kind of situation. We have all been fed certain attitudes that may be hurtful to others by the culture around us. That's not on us; that is on the culture. No one should be canceled for just one tweet or statement. Now, when such a statement is part of an ongoing pattern or somebody absolutely refuses to learn from the hurt that they cause, that may be a different matter. But we all make mistakes, and we all get things wrong; that is a big part of what it means to be human.

What Matters is What Comes Next

So what matters in Jesus' case is not his initial statement so much as what comes after. And what comes after is that the woman challenges him on what he has said. "**Sir,**" she says, "**even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs.**" She knows that what he has just said to her is hurtful. But she also knows that she's not there merely for herself. There's something much bigger at stake than the racism that people like her sometimes experience at the hands of Judeans. So, she actually embraces the derogatory term and turns it back to Jesus in a way that allows him to hear what his words sounded like to her.

In many ways, she is the hero of this story. You just have to admire her chutzpah. We could all probably learn something from her when we find ourselves in a position when people do or say something that they might not realize is hurtful to us.

We Often Double Down

But you know what the human reaction to that kind of situation often is. When we are challenged by somebody in the way that this woman challenges Jesus, our automatic reaction is

often to get our backs up. Who wants to admit that they are wrong? We see this kind of thing all the time in our society.

For example, you can give some people all the evidence in the world about why they should get the vaccine or why they should wear a mask, and they will resist learning anything new about it. In many cases the more reasonable a case you make, the more irrational the response you get. People don't like being wrong and they will actually go so far as deluding themselves to avoid admitting it.

But here is where Jesus truly stands out – where his response goes beyond what is simply human to give us a demonstration of what it might mean for him to be divine. Jesus does not get defensive. He doesn't try and cling to the idea of Judean ethnic superiority that he has been fed all of his life. He learns and he grows in his understanding of this woman who, up until this moment, was merely an ethnic stereotype to him.

The Importance of Incarnation

I do believe in the mystery of the incarnation – the teaching that Jesus was and is, at one and the same time fully human and fully divine. But I also believe that one of the key reasons why the incarnation was needed was in order to show us where, in this world, the human can intersect with the divine – where it can happen for any of us.

We all make mistakes. We have all of us picked up from the culture around us and from our families and others who have formed us ways of looking at the world that are wrong or hurtful. There is nothing extraordinary about that. It is what it is to be human. That is why indeed I do not believe that we ought to “cancel” people for their simple mistakes or their failure to see the flaws in the worldviews that were passed onto them.

The real question is how do you react when you suddenly realize that you might be wrong or, even more importantly, when someone confronts you with the reality that the attitudes you have inherited uncritically are actually hurting people. What do you do then? Oh, that can be so hard. It can feel as if someone is attacking you and you want so much to fight back and defend yourself. I guess my question for you today is to ask yourself how willing are you to follow the example of Christ – the example of his divinity – and not do that? How willing are you to re-examine the worldview you were given as painful or as confusing as that might feel? There are times when I feel as if the very future of humanity itself may hang on the answers to those questions.

But Jesus has already shown us the way and, in doing that, has shown us where the heart of God lies. Isn't it about time that we started to learn from that?