

**ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE**

**WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON**

**Sermon – 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Trinity**

**27<sup>th</sup> June 2021**

**All Saints' Marseille**

*The Revd Jamie Johnston, Chaplain*

It's been called the miracle within the miracle. Even on its own, the story of the raising of Jairus's daughter would be one of the most beautiful in the New Testament. The desperate case of a child in need of a miracle. The miracle being offered freely by Jesus, in the face of the scepticism surrounding him, even when he seems to have arrived too late.

This story is part of Mark's proclamation that the power of God will be finally confirmed by the resurrection of Jesus and the coming of the Kingdom. In his miracles, Jesus makes that power felt, makes the future present. He embodies the fulfilment of our reading from the Book of Wisdom: God 'does not delight in the death of the living'; God 'created us for incorruption, and made us in the image of his own eternity'. Mark's message in this story, anticipating the end of his Gospel, is that even the worst that can befall us is not beyond the reach of God's power to bring healing. The people in the story are given a foretaste of resurrection. A source of faith and hope and love for a community.

So why is this story, beautiful in itself, interrupted with the story of an unnamed woman, at the other end of the social scale, to whom history refers only by

reference to her embarrassing disease? We are being invited to interpret the two miracles in the light of each other. And when we do, we find there are both parallels and contrasts.

Both are stories about human pain. The pain of the parents, the pain of the little girl, the pain of the woman who interrupts Jesus on his way to her. These are people going through some of the very worst things that ever happen to us as humans, encountering Jesus in word and action and emerging from the encounter transformed. Mark makes a more explicit link between the two stories. Jesus is on his way to save the life of a girl twelve years old and is delayed by a woman who has been ill for twelve years, the whole of the girl's life. There's a deliberate pairing. As Jesus prepares to restore life, we are confronted with the truth that for some people life is miserable day after day, compounded by the ways their fellow humans ignore or exclude them.

For the unnamed woman is not only ill. The Book of Leviticus taught that her condition made her ritually unclean, along with everything she touched and everyone who touched what she had touched. For twelve long years she would have been as good as excluded from her faith community. And because such ritual impurity was treated as contagious, people who were ritually unclean were socially excluded too. Nine of the twelve people whom Jesus heals in Mark's Gospel had conditions that put them in this category. I wonder if you have ever felt excluded because of something that is not your fault and over which you have no control. Jesus's healings are not only personal but social. In restoring people to community, he restores the community as well.

Mark emphasises four times that the woman *touched* Jesus. In that sense, this really is a story for our time. Her touch makes him ritually unclean. Jesus then

touches Jairus's daughter, adding further uncleanness. The Book of Numbers stipulates that anyone who touches a dead body is to be considered ritually unclean for seven days, 'cut off from Israel'. (We may think we have invented *consignes sanitaires* in the last fifteen months. Try reading the Books of Leviticus and Numbers.)

Time and again, however, Mark shows Jesus ignoring the ritual purity laws and touching those he came to heal. Even though he is shown elsewhere as being capable of healing from a distance, he chooses to touch the person wherever possible. In doing so, he acknowledges their humanity and faces down their isolation.

So here we have two stories of a girl and a woman, both healed by Jesus's touch. There are contrasts, too, between them. Jairus is named, a local respected figure. The woman is named only by her disease. He is a religious insider. She is considered a danger to ritual purity. He has financial resources (having more rooms than most in his house). She has no money left. He approaches Jesus from the front, advocating for his daughter. She approaches him from behind, silent in her shame.

Yet the woman has two things that none of the hardships she has faced can take away from her: her courage and her faith. She is brave enough to carry out her deed, and trusts that if she succeeds it will work. And she is right. We then hear Mark's favourite word, twice. 'Immediately' her haemorrhage stops. And 'immediately' Jesus is aware that power has gone forth from him. The scene freezes as he asks: 'Who touched my clothes?'

Realising she has been exposed, but knowing also that she has been healed, the woman 'falls down' before Jesus and tells her story. Another act of courage, which has ensured that her story has been told for two thousand years. Jesus

tells her that her faith has made her well. More than that – astonishingly, to those listening to him - he calls this untouchable woman ‘daughter’.

Jairus too had fallen at Jesus’s feet. He is a man used to being in control, but his daughter’s illness has taught him the reality that he is not, that none of us are. Even now the news arrives that it is too late to save her. Jesus turns from commending the woman for her faith and challenges Jairus to have faith too: ‘Do not fear, only believe’. The woman’s twelve years of brokenness have taught her to trust in something other than herself. Jairus has not had that long to learn it, but the message to him is the same: ‘Do not fear, only believe’. Mark then shows his hearers that the power of God is not limited in supply. The synagogue leader does not lose because the unnamed woman has won. Both these ‘daughters’ are healed.

The order of the healings is significant. Although the woman has no status, she is the one Jesus heals first. God’s preferential care for the poor is affirmed. How might we bear witness to that in our lives? The fact of the interruption in the story is significant too. We are constantly interrupted with the inconvenient needs of others. Strangers who stop us in the street and ask for help, friends who ring us to talk about their problems when all we want to do is tell them of our own. We have to do with a God who is constantly nudging us to say – no, the need is over here, and now. If we are to be Christ’s hands, feet and eyes in the world, as Teresa of Avila urged us to be, we must be ready to be interrupted, to be led by the Spirit we know not where. Part of the point of this Gospel story is that Jesus had time both for the daughter of Jairus and for the unnamed woman in the street, so does God, and so must we.

Ironically, it turns out to be purity that is contagious, not impurity – another reason why this is a story for our time. It’s the compassion, the healing, the

faith, the hope and the love that pass from one human being to another. We have seen time and again over the last fifteen months that no prohibitions on touching can prevent that from happening. Our Gospel today, and every day, is a story of transformation. Jesus said: 'I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.' (John 10.10.) Even when it seems impossible. Even when it seems that everything has been lost. That's good news. That's Gospel.

Amen.