

Sermon

Sunday 2nd July, 2006

Lessons

2 Samuel 1: 1, 17 – 27

St Mark 5: 21 – 43

Prayer of Illumination

O LORD, open up Your Word to us, and our hearts to Your Word; that we may know You better and love You more; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Jesus said to the ruler of the synagogue, ‘Be not afraid, only believe.’

Mark 5: 36

We first meet David as the shepherd-boy out caring for his father’s sheep. Young and handsome, he is chosen by God as the new king of Israel. The prophet Samuel goes in search of God’s king, finds the youngest son of Jesse the Bethlehemite, and says that one day this boy will rule all the tribes of Israel. By God’s choosing, David becomes a son of God. Then comes the threatening challenge to the people of Israel from the Philistines: who in Israel has the strength and courage to stand alone against the mighty Goliath? It is the young man, David, who steps forward. It is his faith which marks him out from the rest. David tells the King, Saul, that while caring for the sheep he has faced lions and bears, and he has prevailed. David said that the LORD was with him. As the ‘youth’ stands before the ‘man of war’, as David faces Goliath, he says to the Philistine, ‘I come in the name of the LORD of hosts.’ David stands afraid and nervous perhaps but in the faith that God stands with him; and no matter what dangers he may face or events that may come his way, David feels in his heart and soul that God is with him. It is a marvellous thing, even for five minutes each day, to spend that time thinking about the presence of God, of the Holy One, surrounding us, encircling us, beating within our heart and living in our soul. What a sense of peace and calm there is to be had, available to us each day, at a moment’s notice, when we stop everything, clear out distractions and attractions and be still, knowing that God is present with us. David

stood before Goliath in the knowledge that whatever happened to him, whatever the turn of events, God, the LORD of hosts, was with him.

We see David at different moments in his life: he is a great military leader, he dances naked before the Ark of God, he is lustful towards Absalom and commits adultery, he arranges for the murder of her husband, he is the spiritual giant who can say, ‘The LORD is my shepherd.’ We see David at different moments in his life: this morning we heard the story of the death of Saul and Jonathan, the king and the prince, and we see David in mourning – inconsolable at the death of Jonathan. The Bible portrays the reality of life including human souls refusing to be consoled in bereavement. The king and his son were killed on the mountains of Gilboa and David wrote:

The beauty of Israel is slain upon thy high places:
how are the mighty fallen!
Ye mountains of Gilboa,
let there be no dew,
neither let there be rain upon you,
nor bounteous fields!

Of Jonathan, David wrote:

I am distressed for thee, my brother Jonathan:
very pleasant hast thou been unto me:
thy love to me was wonderful,
passing the love of women.

The poetry in David’s speech is of one who knows utter loss and who finds powerful words to match the loss. In the end, David is left alone. Jonathan has gone and David is broken, defeated. It is with this human experience of loss in mind, carefully and sensitively portrayed, that we turn to the Gospel of Mark and the stories of the death of Jairus’ daughter and the haemorrhaging woman.

Jairus is one of the rulers of the synagogue. As such, he is a respected member of the community, a religious leader and a man of influence. Jairus comes in search of Jesus and, as a mark of respect to a prophet, he falls to his knees before Jesus. In desperation and feeling the pain within himself, as any parent would feel, he says to Jesus, 'I pray thee, come and lay thy hands on [my daughter], that she may be healed; and she shall live.' Jesus goes with him. As he makes his way to the girl's bedside, the crowd swarms around Jesus, 'followed him and thronged him,' says the Authorised Version. A woman who had bled for twelve years reaches through the crowd and touches Jesus' garment. I believe that she will have seen and listened to Jesus before so much so that she believed God somehow to be in this man. So great was her need and so deep was her faith in him that she thought, 'If I can only but touch him, then I will be healed.' That is indeed faith: to reach out, like Michaelangelo's Adam, hoping for the reciprocating touch of God. She touches Jesus and he turns to discover who has touched him. The woman steps forward out of the crowd, tells her story of her suffering and of her faith in him. Jesus replies, 'Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace and be healed of your disease.'

In Jesus' day, the haemorrhaging woman would have been a complete outcast. She would defile anyone with whom she came into contact. Every woman from the most ancient of days, from Eve in the Book of Genesis, was 'unclean' for one week of the month. This particular woman was unclean all of the time because of the disorder and she touched a rabbi. No wonder she hid herself once she had touched him. Richard Dawkins tells of the occasion when he turned up to take part in a television interview about the cloning of Dolly the sheep along with, what he calls, a prominent religious leader recently elevated to the House of Lords. Dawkins said that the religious leader

refused to shake hands with the women in the television studio in fear that they might be ‘unclean.’ In contrast to the Church bearing his name, Jesus stood with the woman, listened to her story, her pain and hope, did not for a second condemn her nor banish her from his sight, but commended her for her faith in the face of everyone present, in the face of every man present. This woman in the story is a woman of faith. It is the ‘uncleanness’ of women which has been at the root of Jewish patriarchy. It is the ‘uncleanness’ of women which has for twenty centuries has helped keep women from ordination within the worldwide Church. When the Anglican Church discussed the ordination of women in the 1990s, it was said that if women were ordained they would ‘defile’ the sanctuary and the sacrament at a certain time each month. Miriam Winter wrote this poem:

When a young girl bleeds in a woman’s way,
she refrains from Eucharist
in Ghana, I am told.
When a woman bleeds
on days she is between
the months she is with child,
she cooks and eats her meals apart
because she is defiled,
so several wives for the man you see
are a practical necessity,
a tradition from of old.
Jesus,
the blood of the woman who bled
mingles with the blood you shed,
as a sign of contradiction,
for it has been revealed:
who touches the hem of your justice
absolutely will be healed,
but not without crucifixion.
Now what will it take
to stop the flood
of discrimination
associated with blood?

Jesus set aside the stigma of femaleness and the deep-rooted prejudice of his society.

He said to her, ‘Daughter, your faith has made you well.’ ‘Daughter’: he has restored

her as a child of God. This story is all the more shocking because Jesus stopped to speak to the 'unclean' woman while on the way to help the daughter of a Jewish religious leader. I wonder how he, as a figure of respectability, felt that the man before whom he had knelt delayed his journey to speak to an 'unclean' woman? Imagine his impatience with Jesus for appearing behaving as though the little girl's life did not matter – and all for an unclean woman! Professor Brian Thorne, psychotherapist and Christian, has said:

Most people who come to the therapist's door are hurting, feel unloved, often quite denigrated, that they are worthless. So the question is, how do you make them feel that they are loveable and have the capacity to love?

Professor Thorne says that in his own life it is important to receive the Eucharist:

I don't know what I would do if I didn't have access to the Eucharist for any length of time. It enables me, usually, to feel that closeness to God, a kind of internalisation of God, a taking of the divine into me, that is absolutely critical.

In the Eucharist, he handles the bread and wine, he sacramentally touches Christ and is touched by him. Jesus understands the deep-seated human need to love and be loved. Jesus stood with the 'unclean' woman.

If the first taboo which Jesus blows out of the water is the 'uncleanness' of women, then the second one is the taboo surrounding death. The raising of the dead is the climax of the entire Gospel story; it is the climax of the Christian Bible and in the story of the raising of Jairus' daughter, as in the raising of Lazarus, we have a foretaste of the Resurrection to eternal life. At the bedside of the dead girl, Jesus takes her hand saying, 'Little girl, I say unto thee, arise.' John Bell's hymn, *We cannot care for you*, written with the death of a very young child in mind reflects parental loss:

We cannot care for you the way we wanted,
or cradle you or listen for your cry;
but, separated as we are by silence,

love will not die.

We cannot watch you growing into childhood,
nor find a new uniqueness every day;
but special as you would have been among us
you still will stay.

So through the mess of anger, grief and tiredness,
through tensions which are not yet reconciled,
we give to God the worship of our sorrow
and our dear child.

Jesus' touches the dead child and breaks the taboo about touching a dead body considered 'unclean'. He does so to show that there is no illness, no state of uncleanness, no state at all into which men, woman and children can fall from which God cannot redeem, renew and resurrect. John Bell's hymn closes with the verse:

Lord, in your arms, which cradle all creation,
we rest and place our [child] beyond death,
believing that she now, alive in heaven,
breathes with your breath.

The stories we have shared this morning tell us that God is acquainted with grief and loss: with the grief of David for Jonathan and the grief of Jairus' for his daughter. The stories tell us of the deep-seated human need to love and be loved and, above all, the stories tell us that faith in Jesus is a power in our heart and soul to overturn the taboos of exclusion of our day, and a strength to face death knowing that it is never too late for Jesus to redeem, renew and resurrect.

Amen.