Sermon – Mayfield Salisbury Parish Church

Lamentations 3:22-33; Mark 5:21-43

There are two passages to reflect on briefly this morning before we turn to the gospel passage from Mark.

The first of these is the reading from Lamentations set for today. Written in the 6th century BC, Lamentations is a poetical outpouring of lament and loss following the terrible fall of Jerusalem to the conquering Babylonian army in 587 BC. We hear the depth of mourning in one of its early verses:

 What can I say for you; to what compare you,

 O daughter Jerusalem?

 To what can I liken you, that I may comfort you,

 O virgin daughter Zion?

 For vast as the sea is your ruin:

 who can heal you? (2:13)

As in the Book of Job, Lamentations explores why such a terrible calamity has happened. Is it the heavy hand of God against the people’s persistent disobedience? But then, amidst the woe and tragedy and heartfelt prayers for God’s restoring, there is a wonderful surprise in the middle of the book to come across some of the most affirming and hopeful verses in the Bible:

 “*The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases,*

 *his mercies never come to an end;*

 *they are new every morning;*

 *great is your faithfulness.” (vv.22-23)*

The other passage to reflect on bares a similar theme. It’s one of the additional readings set for today in the Anglican tradition, which comes from the Wisdom of Solomon:

“*God … does not delight in the death of the living. For he created all things so that they might live; …*

*For God created us for life, and made us in the image of his own eternity, …” (1: 13-14; 2:23)*

We begin, therefore, with these promises and assurances: the steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, and God’s desire for us is life, life in all its fullness, life in eternity with him.

As we come to our gospel story, we encounter Jesus at its centre. In every way, he personifies the steadfast love of the Lord, offering hope and restored fullness of life to those who have experienced enormous suffering and loss.

In Mark’s account, we meet two very different people driven by desperation and need. Jairus is a wealthy leader of the synagogue whose young daughter lies dying. It’s an extraordinary thing that he does in turning to Jesus for help. The Jewish authorities weren’t happy with Jesus, and so for Jairus to come and trust Jesus to heal his daughter is a huge step and risk to take. He doesn’t come in private or whisper his request to Jesus, but in the midst of the crowd gathered around Jesus, he throws himself at his feet and pleads repeatedly that he will come and lay hands on his daughter that she may be made well and live. Recognising the fear and desperation, Jesus says nothing, but goes with Jairus straight away, still surrounded by the crowd.

On the way, a woman reaches out in her own desperation and need. It’s hard to imagine the plight she has experienced for twelve long years in suffering from a disease that caused unchecked internal bleeding. Alongside the suffering of her illness, she has endured the discomfort of various treatments suggested by physicians and spent all she had on those failed remedies that only made her condition worse. Like those who suffered from leprosy, she was regarded as ceremonially unclean and it would have been impossible for her to have physical contact with others. For twelve years she would have been barred from access to places of worship, from fellowship and from the comfort of the nearer presence of God.

In desperation, therefore, she reaches out to touch just the hem of Jesus’s cloak. Unlike Jairus, she desperately wants to be unnoticed. If others recognised her, they would force her away and perhaps she feared that if she approached Jesus to speak to Him, He would dismiss her too if he knew her condition.

So quietly and from behind, but with daring, the woman reaches out. There are many who jostle around Jesus in the crowd, but only one who reaches out with the touch of faith. And with that touch, her bleeding stops immediately. For her that might have been enough. But it isn’t for Jesus. He senses that power has gone out of him, but in her touch he has also felt her rejection, the fear of being in public, the loneliness and shame of being shunned for so long. By making the woman identify herself in public and tell her story, Jesus highlights her faith and cares for her whole being. He sends her away with the affirming words: “Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace, …” (v.34), overcoming her fear and hurt and ensuring she is received back into the heart and life of the community. She leaves restored in health and life and, indeed, with the blessing of her own life-giving capacity restored.

At this point Jairus learns that his daughter has died and his friends urge him not to bother Jesus anymore. But Jesus is having none of that. Again he encourages Jairus’s faith with the words, “Do not fear, only believe.” (v.36) As Jesus takes the daughter’s hand and speaks the words: “Little girl, get up!”, she’s restored to life, to the amazement of all those present.

We may come with different expectations of this account: with a desire to read and accept it as a true unfolding of events and portrayal of Jesus’s power as Son of God, Lord of Life, to heal and to restore life; or we may wish to find a wider significance in what Mark has set down. Throughout the stories that Mark tells, it is as though the miracles *in themselves* are of lesser account. What Mark highlights for us is the intimate nature of the contact between the individual and Jesus that he expects and hopes his readers will develop for themselves.[[1]](#footnote-1)

For many and for a long time, Mark’s Gospel has been regarded as the easiest Gospel to read. It’s short, it uses everyday language and has been viewed as the action Gospel. There are no birth narratives, very little introduction to who Jesus is and instead we launch straightaway into Jesus’s ministry and the narrative unfolds at great pace.

More recently, Rowan Williams in his book, *Meeting God in Mark*, speaks of Mark’s individual genius in the composition of his Gospel. “Once you see that Mark is arguing a case, developing a vision, you see that the Gospel of Mark, surprisingly, is not very much less sophisticated than the Gospel of John.” (pp.19-20)

Williams suggests that Mark is writing for a Church that is ”baffled and fearful” because signs and miracles are not happening. What was happening was “persecution and a sense of threat and failure.” (p.46)

In our own personal lives and in the situations of the world around us, we can identify with those feelings and outlook. We experience trauma and suffering, tragedy and loss, without a sense of God stepping in in power to change it. Looking around our world, Christians living in poverty-stricken parts of Asia and Africa, in places of unrest like Afghanistan, the Ukraine, Syria, Iraq, northern Nigeria, will also read Mark with a depth of personal understanding. They are living as Rowan Williams writes:

“in a setting where God is not stepping down from heaven to solve problems, where suffering and insecurity and even the risk of death are daily facts. These are the sorts of people for whom Mark was writing: writing to reinforce a faith in the God who does not step down from heaven to solve problems but who is already in the heart of the world, holding the suffering and the pain in himself and transforming it by the sheer indestructible energy of his mercy.” (pp. 46-47)

The miracles are not magic on demand, but illustrative of God’s steadfast love and compassion in our midst, centred on the person of Jesus Christ. In love, he risks all, gives up all, to secure restored fullness of life for us in oneness with God. Here in this passage, as Jesus commands the little girl to get up (v.41), Mark uses the same Greek word that is used at the end of the Gospel to announce Jesus’s resurrection at the tomb (16:6); and he uses the same word to describe her rising that Jesus uses when he predicts his own rising from the dead (8:31).[[2]](#footnote-2) For the discerning reader, the new hope of fullness of life, of eternal life in relation with Christ, through his death and resurrection, is already proclaimed by Mark right at the heart of the gospel.

Some years ago, a friend shared the story of a Christian couple whose lives were hit by tragedy, when the wife was diagnosed with terminal cancer in her middle years. She never appeared distraught at the news, but continued with stalwart calm. Another friend asked her: “How do you know such calm in the face of approaching death?” The lady responded: “I built a firm foundation before the storms came.” Her faith and trust in the enduring love of Christ and her hope in fullness of lasting life in him, carried her through the changing journey of life.

As those who know fullness of life and love in Christ, we also have a life-giving capacity to share with others. In the late 1970s, following the terrible genocide in Cambodia at the hands of the Khmer Rouge, that became the mission of Pastor Chomno in Poipet in NE Cambodia. He founded the Cambodian Hope Organization (CHO), with a vision to promote hope-filled communities in meeting physical, psychological and spiritual needs. The organisation has sought to strengthen the quality of life for disadvantaged rural people and now provides help with farming and fish farming, vocational training, full-time education for children who would otherwise go without, school-on-a-mat for children in remote communities and medical care and support for those with HIV/AIDS. Putting an end to child trafficking also remains a particular aim. In the whole region of SE Asia, a child is trafficked every eight minutes as a means of making money in such an impoverished community. At the heart of all CHO’s work remains the person of Jesus Christ, as renewed hope and potential for life are offered in his Name.

To finish, the author Eugenia Price (1916-96) wrote:

“Life is not beautiful all the time. But through the ugliness and pain … and loneliness there is available to every human being the fragrance of the very Presence of Christ.”

In his presence, may we grasp the fullness of love and the fullness of life eternal poured out to us through Christ.

Amen.

1. Tom Wright *Mark for Everyone* (SPCK, 2001), pp.60-61. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. *Roots*, Adult and All Age: Resources for the weekly lectionary, Issue 77, May/June 2015, p.38. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)