



Revd Ro's Reflection on The Fourth Sunday after Trinity

Proper 8 Year B

2 Corinthians 8. 7-15

Mark 5. 21-43

Our gospel reading begins 'When Jesus had crossed again in the boat to the other side,' we remember from last week Jesus asked his disciples to put out in the boat to cross to the other side of the lake and they had been struck by a huge storm which Jesus stilled.

He alighted at the south east side of the lake which wasn't Jewish territory. There he was met by 'Legion' the demoniac in the land of the Gerasenes. Jesus cures him and sends the demons into a herd of pigs. The Jews of course do not eat pork, a clear indication this is not Jewish territory. 'Legion' also occupied the graveyard or burial place and would therefore have been seen as unclean by the Jews. Jesus restores him and the last we see of him is sitting clothed and calm at Jesus' feet. Another storm that has been stilled and once again it is cosmic because Jesus has defeated the powers of evil as he will on Calvary. Another interesting thing about this story is that the man asks if he can accompany Jesus. Jesus will not let him but tells him to go to his own people and witness to his cure and restoration to new life. He is then the first to take the message to the Gentiles!

So now Jesus has crossed back again to his own land. We have two stories here, the story of Jairus' daughter and the woman with haemorrhages. They are of course two separate stories but Mark has put them together and they should be seen together and not just because they happen at the same time. They are about faith.

The story of Jairus tells of Jesus restoring a life. It is told in the synoptic gospels Matthew 9.18-26, Luke 8.40-56, and our version in Mark. If you look at all three accounts they are almost identical and Luke's and Mark's accounts are remarkably detailed.

As soon as Jesus steps ashore he is once again surrounded by a vast crowd and pressed in on every side. It must have been hugely exhausting. He is greeted by Jairus. It is important to note that Jairus has an important position in Jewish religious life. He is a leader of the synagogue. We have seen so much antagonism to Jesus from the Jewish leaders and religious sects that Jairus stands out as does Nicodemus. There is no antagonism here, just the opposite, he comes in faith. There is no air of superiority; his first action is so important, "when he saw him he fell at his feet.' Jairus, like the

centurion, is begging for healing for another, not for himself. There is nothing like the power of love. When someone you love is ill you are desperate for them to be well. All other concerns, worries and the preoccupations of life are as nothing. The earth shifts perspectives as it were and we see clearly. There is only one thing of importance now for Jairus - his daughter. It is obvious just how sick this little twelve year old girl is. This, Jairus thinks, is the point of no return.

Jairus goes to where Jesus is. The key thing here is Jairus' desire for Jesus to heal her. He 'begged him repeatedly, 'My little daughter is at the point of death. Come and lay your hands on her, so that she may be made well, and live.' The second thing is that Jesus does not question him, he knows the depth of his need, and he knows the depth of his faith. Mark continues with those powerful words, 'So he went with him.'

We have seen Jesus still the storm and the terror in the eyes of the disciples. The story of 'Legion' is another of terror and tumult; of a man wracked by deadly forces. Jesus stills that storm and restores his life. Now he sees the storm of Jairus' fear, a fear so great it is palpable. To get a fuller understanding it would be good to put ourselves into his shoes.

Suddenly as Jesus is striding towards Jairus' home there is an interruption. We can imagine what Jairus is feeling. The crowd follows Jesus no doubt wanting to see what will happen. It is no accident of course that Mark adds, 'And a large crowd followed him and pressed in on him.' That last detail is of vital importance as we shall see.

We know the position of women in Jesus' day, and this woman 'had been suffering from haemorrhages for twelve years.' We can only imagine her desperation, not only because of her physical illness and the suffering that meant, but also because anyone who had bodily discharge was considered unclean by the Jews. Imagine the life she must have had socially and mentally. She was an outcast and ostracised.

Add to that the awful thought that, ²⁶'She had endured much under many physicians, and had spent all that she had; and she was no better, but rather grew worse.' One can only imagine her life of suffering.

Now suddenly she hears that the master is near. Now suddenly there is a chance. BUT – she is unclean, she should not be by him, let alone touching him. Her faith overcomes all of that.

²⁷'She had heard about Jesus, and came up behind him in the crowd and touched his cloak, ²⁸for she said, 'If I but touch his clothes, I will be made well.'

I think that this is one of the most moving stories in the gospels. Just look again at what she says to herself. There is no doubt at all in her mind. This is not a last resort trial and hope. This is sure. It will happen, I will be cured. ²⁹'immediately her haemorrhage stopped; and she felt in her body that she was healed of her disease.'

It was immediate – and she knows it. Then another remarkable thing, ³⁰ 'Immediately aware that power had gone forth from him,' Mark's repetition of the word immediately is deliberate and vitally important. Jesus knew that power, the power from God within him, the power to cure had gone to someone; he knew he had healed. Jesus turned about in the crowd and said, 'Who touched my clothes?'

It is a moment when fear turns to joy and turns to fear again in the woman. What now? She knows that culturally a woman in her position should not have done this and yet---. The disciples who see things literally say how can you say that when you are being pushed about from pillar to post.

I wonder, does Jesus also know who had touched him. Does he wait for her to tell the truth? ³²He looked all round to see who had done it. ³³ But the woman, knowing what had happened to her, came in fear and trembling, fell down before him, and told him the whole truth.'

I love those words 'told him the whole truth,' as I have said before John uses them in his gospel when he says, 'The truth will set you free.'

Well the truth has set the woman free. Look at Jesus' next words. ³⁴'He said to her, 'Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace, and be healed of your disease.' Her faith has made her whole but also Jesus' acknowledgement after she tells the truth completes the healing. This is not done by stealth anymore. There is nothing to be ashamed of. It is in the bright light of day.

Jesus cuts through cruel customs and breaks the chains that bind us whatever they are. He frees the woman from her spiritual misery as well as her physical illness. She is a complete person again. Just imagine how her life has been transformed by the healing touch of Jesus. Now she has no more physical suffering and no more shame either. She is free. Death is turned to new life by Christ. She is unnamed but she stands like a shining beacon of faith in the gospels.

Jairus has been on tenterhooks all this while, what about his daughter, she is on the point of death. Jairus seems different to the woman. He is desperate for some chance of a healing and this young rabbi might just be able to help. All he needs to do is to lay hands upon her he says but somehow his faith doesn't seem as strong as the woman's.

But suddenly all seems over. ³⁵ 'While he was still speaking, some people came from the leader's house to say, 'Your daughter is dead. Why trouble the teacher any further?' We can only imagine Jairus' grief and his desperation. Yet into the storm once again comes the still small voice of calm; the voice of God.

'Jesus said to the leader of the synagogue, 'Do not fear, only believe.'

It is a challenge as well as instruction. Follow me and all will be well. This is the pivotal moment. Jairus does believe. He has the master's assurance. All will be well – just have faith - and he does, Jairus finds faith, faith to follow Jesus.

Those are Jesus' words to us in whatever situation we may find ourselves.

'Do not fear, only believe.'

It is interesting that Jesus does not let anyone else follow; only the chosen band of disciples, those who will be with him on the mount of the transfiguration and in the garden.

³⁷'He allowed no one to follow him except Peter, James, and John, the brother of James. '

There was in Jesus' time a tradition of having professional mourners at a death. Grief was to be shown openly not locked away inside which as we know can be very damaging. They were already there. The little girl is dead. Jesus is going into a house of death. Anyone who touched a dead body would be unclean. It is a theme that runs through these readings. But the power of Jesus cuts through all of that. He summarily dismisses the mourners

³⁹ 'When he had entered, he said to them, 'Why do you make a commotion and weep? The child is not dead but sleeping.' ⁴⁰And they laughed at him. Then he put them all outside,'

They of course misinterpret his words. The girl has died just as surely as the son of the widow at Nain, just as surely as Lazarus of Bethany. Here in the house of Jairus of Capernaum Jesus will restore a life. It is important to pause here and remember this NOT resurrection. It is a restoration of human life. The three will die again, the cycle of human life will continue but for the moment Jesus overcomes death to restore her to her family. It is the little girl's mother and father who accompany him. It is a wonderful detail of love.

‘and took the child’s father and mother and those who were with him, and went in where the child was.’

What Jesus does next is once more to have physical contact as he did with Peter on the lake. He holds the little girl’s hand in love and then says those tender words.

‘Talitha cum’, which means, ‘little girl, get up!’

But they are words of command too. The power of death is vanquished in that strong command. Note once more the word ‘immediately’ is used. Jesus speaks and it happens just as his words brought creation to being.

⁴²‘And immediately the girl got up and began to walk about (she was twelve years of age). At this they were overcome with amazement.’

The next detail is quite exact. ‘Give her something to eat.’ Just as Jesus at his resurrection appearance says have you anything to eat. It is reality they witness.

Jesus refuses to let them tell of this. The time is not right for people to know. His ministry has a long way to go and the powers that be are antagonistic to him. The time and place is not yet but it will be finally acted out in Jerusalem. Then the powers will vent their anger and kill him and right there he will beat them once and for all. There by his love he will conquer evil and sin. At the resurrection he will conquer death. These victories over death during his ministry prefigure the final victory of Jesus, God and man.

The healing love of Jesus is there for us too. The words of the hymn ‘Immortal love’ sum this up.

‘The healing of his seamless dress is by our beds of pain. We touch him in life’s throng and press and we are whole again.’

I usually draw a comparison between the gospel reading and our New Testament reading. The gospel shows two people whose utter commitment and faith in Jesus lead to practical action. It is pretty clear though from our reading that the Corinthians are not doing that. I must admit that when I first read the epistle I scratched my head. Firstly it is pretty impossible to understand taken out of context as it is here – as a stand-alone reading. We were looking at chapter six last week now we have jumped to chapter eight. That’s always a difficult thing to do with St Paul. What happened immediately before our reading begins is highly significant.

⁷‘Now as you excel in everything—in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in utmost eagerness, and in our love for you—so we want you to excel also in this generous undertaking.’

Well firstly we ask what generous undertaking Paul is referring to? To find out we need to go back to 1 Corinthians 16. 1-4. Without this the reading is a bit like a riddle without a clue. This is what Paul says to them then,

‘Now concerning the collection for the saints: you should follow the directions I gave to the churches of Galatia. On the first day of every week, each of you is to put aside and save whatever extra you earn, so that collections need not be taken when I come. And when I arrive, I will send any whom you approve with letters to take your gift to Jerusalem. If it seems advisable that I should go also, they will accompany me.’

Now we know what the ‘generous undertaking’ refers to, we can move forward more easily.

Paul has, to put it mildly, had problems with the church in Corinth. They have been challenging him and his position as we have seen. At times it feels almost as if he is defending himself to them. He might get irritated with them but he always shows love.

Now we know what the topic is we need to see what its context is – what Paul writes to them just before this reading of ours set for today. It is a large extract but it makes things clear. Paul is referring to the churches in Macedonia that would be at Philippi and Thessalonica.

^{8.1}'We want you to know, brothers and sisters, about the grace of God that has been granted to the churches of Macedonia; ²for during a severe ordeal of affliction, their abundant joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part. ³For, as I can testify, they voluntarily gave according to their means, and even beyond their means, ⁴begging us earnestly for the privilege of sharing in this ministry to the saints— ⁵and this, not merely as we expected; they gave themselves first to the Lord and, by the will of God, to us, ⁶so that we might urge Titus that, as he had already made a beginning, so he should also complete this generous undertaking among you.'

Paul is talking about collecting money to help the poor church in Jerusalem. It is quite obvious that the Christians in Macedonia though they are not well off themselves and have suffered awful persecution have given generously to help their brothers and sisters in Christ in Jerusalem in their financial difficulty. The 'grace of God' here does not refer to the saving promises of God freely given to Christians, actually what Paul is referring to is the gift of money and if you like the greatness of heart shown by these Christians. They are not just taking up a collection they are doing so happily and it is in that respect a grace. It is an outpouring of love for the universal church; more than that it underlines unity. The church in Jerusalem is made up of Jews, whereas these people are Gentiles but there is no division now, all are one in Christ.

³'For, as I can testify, they voluntarily gave according to their means, and even beyond their means, ⁴begging us earnestly for the privilege of sharing in this ministry to the saints.'

It is an outpouring of love. We think of Jesus' words 'Where your treasure is there will your heart be also.'

How true is that! To give grudgingly is worth nothing, to give in love is a great joy and a sign of true faith and commitment. So the Macedonian Christians are living out the Christ life. Paul says quite clearly that the faith and Christian life of the Corinthians is inextricably united with their giving. He is not ordering them to give – that is worthless, any gift must come from the heart and be given in love but he is juxtaposing it with the response of the Macedonian Christians who give of their all though they have little.

Paul develops this theme of living the Christ life by referring to Jesus' emptying of himself.

⁹'For you know the generous act of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich.'

As I read this I thought at once of one of my favourite passages, the great Christ hymn from Philippians 2. 2-11.

⁵Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,

⁶ who, though he was in the form of God,
did not regard equality with God
as something to be exploited,

⁷ but emptied himself,
taking the form of a slave,
being born in human likeness.

And being found in human form,

⁸ he humbled himself

and became obedient to the point of death—
even death on a cross.’

It takes us to the hymn ‘Hands that flung stars into space to cruel nails surrendered.’ Jesus is part of the Godhead but in humility he became poor living not just as a human being but one who had nothing in terms of worldly possessions. He gave up all to win us unimaginable riches. Paul is telling them not just to talk about things but to live it out, to begin and continue to the end and not give up. The Corinthians started well enough, they began to put money aside but enthusiasm dwindled. Well that means their heart isn’t in it. If your heart isn’t in what you do as Christians you are not doing God’s will fully. What if Jesus, on the stony path he had to tread, had given up? Where would humanity have been then? All this is implicit in what Paul says. He is not haranguing them, he doesn’t actually even use the word money but his meaning is crystal clear.

This advice of Paul applies to us too and all Christians If we love Jesus, if we care about the church we give what we can in love. ¹²‘For if the eagerness is there, the gift is acceptable according to what one has—not according to what one does not have.’ We have got to want to give in love or actually it is worth nothing. But a real outpouring of love will mean our hearts are in our gift and our heart is in the church of God.

¹³‘I do not mean that there should be relief for others and pressure on you, but it is a question of a fair balance between ¹⁴your present abundance and their need, so that their abundance may be for your need, in order that there may be a fair balance.’

This I think is what all ministers try to make clear. No one wants to put financial pressure on anyone. We give as we can, not as we can’t. The Corinthian church is being asked to contribute to help others in need. That means that all have enough. This is fundamentally the Christian way. It is the just way.

“The one who had much did not have too much, and the one who had little did not have too little.”
Exodus 16. 18.

Of course this extends not just to giving in the church collection but to the world. As Christians we are called to care for all humanity and to give in love to relieve the suffering and need of others. We know that when an envelope comes through our letter box asking us to help those in need then as Christians that is what we are called to do. We do so as we can afford.

We remember the story of the widow’s coin. As Jesus says, ‘She has given all she can.’ By extension that means we give all we can by living in the way of Jesus and we give all we can in our lives for others too. Then just as the two people in our gospel reading did, we are putting our faith into action.

‘This is our God the servant King; he calls us now to follow him, to bring our lives as a daily offering of worship to the servant king.’ Graham Kendrick.

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