

Sermon Ordinary Sunday 13 Year B 2021

We are blessed in this sacred place to be surrounded by any number of glittering treasures: the fine stencil work, 'Gregory's goalposts', the Oxford Rood, the venetian Mosaic and the collection of 18th and 19th century paintings now removed to protect them during our roof works. But it is perhaps the stained-glass windows that make the most immediate visual impact. There are the usual depictions of scenes from the life Our Lord. Some apostles and evangelists scattered about. But there are a few stand-out peculiarities. Jesus in the house of Mary and Martha is certainly not common. I have never seen a depiction of the revelation of John the Divine. Most unusual, the 'Judas window' above the west door. But just out of sight of most of you, the scene depicted in today's Gospel: the raising of Jairus' daughter. Perhaps when you come back from Communion take a moment to have a look. A simple scene of both intimacy and power. We hear the story today from Mark, though our window gives reference to Matthew's telling of the same. Both accounts pair it with the woman healed from a flow of blood. But whereas Matthew takes just 8 verses to tell both stories, Mark takes a significant 22! We might miss the window tucked around the corner. But for Mark this is an important account, not to be missed!

The evangelist Mark really is seeking to remind his readers, as we heard last week in Jesus calming the storm on the lake, of Jesus' mastery over the forces of chaos. Now to get to where we are today, we have skipped over the also-important story of the Gerasene demoniac. But even without picking up *that* story the impression is the same. Jesus steps off the boat and on to the shore, only to be met by this *wave* of neediness, of disease and death. Jesus steps off the boat and almost before he draws breath, the crowds surround and confront him with their brokenness and neediness. But the same presence of peace and stillness experienced on the boat Jesus brings with him to the shore. As on the boat, the swirling wave of human need does disturb his serenity.

Mark links the account of the raising of Jairus' daughter with the healing of woman with the flow of blood, not only by sandwiching them together, but also by a number of key similarities, as well as an important play of contrasts. Both Jairus and the woman are desperate for Jesus' help, and both stories highlight '12 years' - the age of Jairus' daughter and the time the woman had suffered from her ailment. But it is in the differences and *the contrasts* between the two stories which make the decisive point the evangelist Mark is seeking to make here.

Jairus, a named man, is a person of means and influence. As synagogue leader, he had probably contributed financially to the community and was looked to for leadership. By *contrast*, a woman, nameless, and her bleeding would have made her unclean and unable to participate fully in the life of the community. And she stands alone. There is no supporting act about her whereas about Jairus and his house there is a jostling crowd. What's more, Jairus approaches Jesus confidently and directly. The woman, meanwhile, because of her shame, creeps up from behind, and dares ask for nothing.

Male and female, rich and poor, named and unnamed, alone and in company, confidence and shame, influential and marginal. There could barely be more difference. But in the face of real human need, none of that really counts for much. Before Jesus we are *all the same*: in need of his help! None of the things that usually divide and separate human beings matters when we stand before the Lord Christ and humbly seek his help. Before God we are united, we all stand on an even plane. How quick we are at times to forget this...

To bring home this point - that despite appearances there is more in common between the woman and Jairus than human standards would have us imagine - the very issues which Jesus is called upon to address: that Jairus' daughter is not just gravely ill, she in fact dies, and the woman's very problem identified at the outset, her haemorrhage. It is often noted that the woman with the flow of blood would have been ritually unclean. Mark in fact uses the two phrases 'discharge of blood' and 'flow of blood' which match the passages in Leviticus which deal with the issue of impurity and blood. We can see why this would have left her 'destitute'. According to Old Testament purity laws, she had to abstain from sexual relations, be cut off from her religious community, and banished from the city. No wonder she had spent all she had on every crank and charlatan in an attempt to end this situation.

But what further links the two stories we hear today, is that impurity *also* comes from *touching* a corpse, as the law of the Book of Numbers is clear to tell. And not just touching a corpse, even entering a house where there is a corpse makes a person unclean. These two stories, then, are not only connected by the time period of 12 years, and not just the contrast between the two scenarios (a wealthy, respectable, named man, and a destitute, outcast, unnamed woman). They are also connected by the theme of impurity, and Jesus' supposed transgression of the laws of purity.

Mark hammers home this point by repeated reference to 'touching.' Jairus pleads with Jesus to 'lay hands on' his daughter; when he comes Jesus indeed 'takes her by the hand'; the woman is determined to 'touch' Jesus' garment; Jesus announces that he has been 'touched' and the disciples marvel that he knows someone has 'touched' him. Any Jew aware of the laws of purity would be alert to this language. But the point is that Jesus reaching out to touch, and by being touched, *doesn't in fact* make him impure or cut him off, or make him unclean. He cannot be cut off from the presence of God because *he is* the presence of God! This is not a story about what Jesus does, much less about what 'happens' to him. It is a statement about *who* he is.

These two powerful stories, yes, highlight Jesus' peaceful presence in the chaos of life. Yes, show again his control over the forces of nature and his ability to heal and bring life. But they also show *the extent* to which God's *presence* in Christ is able to go. It signals the scope of his mission in the world of broken humanity. And this really is one of the great consolations of our faith: that *there is no sphere of human life* beyond the healing, redeeming, lifegiving touch of the Lord Christ. There need be no place in *our* hearts and in our lives that we ought keep from him. The stories today indicate he can deal with it all. Indeed, that is the reason he came into the world, to deal with it all!

The first generation of Jesus' disciples were noted for mingling without divisions. Indeed, this was one of the keys to the evangelical success of the early church. For the first time in human history - and as a living sign of the scope of the reign of God, and as a reflection of Jesus' own ministry - a community of peoples that transcended the divisions of race, sex, class, age, wealth, socio-economic status, education, ethnicity, language, the lot! Perhaps we are used to this idea in the church, though it can be surprising how 'samey' some communities can be.... And where else does this occur, except in some contrived social experiment, to fulfill some quota, or some PR imagery? But the vast arena of humankind *united* in their need of the Lord Christ, and Jesus reaching out and touching that need, really challenges the idea that the kingdom of God is made up of 'a certain kind of person'. And it challenges *us* about the people we welcome and include or overlook and exclude. We should permit a degree of untidiness, to allow for the strange and the odd. Sometimes our urge is to make the church just a bit too neat and prissy. Sometimes we want to sanitise our idea of God, and of what we might bring before God. Jesus reaches out to the mess, imperfection, *the impurity* of our world. We shouldn't be afraid to go there as well. Amen.