

12th Sunday of Ordinary Time 2018

Mthr Judith Brown

Mark 5.21-43

Our gospel for today retells two of the loveliest stories about Christ's healing ministry. One is wrapped around the other in a manner typical of Mark's writing; so that each reinforces and illuminates the other. We have first the "big story" of Jairus, a leader of the Capernaum synagogue who hears that Jesus has been preaching and healing in Galilee and comes and throws himself at Jesus's feet, begging him to come and lay hands on his little daughter who is near death. Jesus goes with him, but is interrupted by the sense that from among the surrounding crowd someone has touched him and power has gone out of him. You can almost see the disciples shaking their heads when he asks who touched him: the throng is so great obviously people are touching him. But a woman steps forward and admits that she has indeed touched

Jesus, hoping for healing from haemorrhages which she has endured for 12 years despite consulting many doctors. Admitting what she has done must have been hugely courageous as she was ritually impure as a result of her illness, and would have known that she should have kept away from everyone. Her desperation had driven her to believe that there was hope for her even if she just touched the hem of his cloak. Jesus speaks to her with gentle courtesy and tells her that her faith has made her well. The writer now returns to poor Jairus, who must have been appalled at the delay. Moreover, he has heard from people who have come from his home that his daughter is dead and they suggest he should trouble the teacher no further. But Jesus insists on going with him, urging him not to be afraid but to believe. There follows the scene of pandemonium and loud mourning outside the house, and Jesus goes in quietly just with the parents and his close friends; and he takes the 12-year old by the hand and says, "Little girl, get up."

She does: and charmingly he tells her parents to give her something to eat.

These two stories can be read in several ways and at different depths. One might want to emphasise that Jesus cared about women in his ministry – though Luke is often thought to be the writer who sees the significance of women in the life and work of Jesus. Or one might see a major point of the stories being the welcome and care for those who are of little value and ritually polluting. Instructions in Leviticus about avoiding an impure woman mattered little to him in a situation of dire need; he welcomed the frightened and sick woman rather than berating her for touching him. And of course the little girl was equally polluting to him as she was a dead body when Jesus took her hand and restored her to life. What mattered to him was that both should be restored to wholeness of life and to their families and communities.

At the heart of the two stories are the themes of healing and wholeness, and the way the ministry of Jesus brings new and abundant life. Around him life-giving things happened. Luke records that when John the Baptist sent his disciples to ask Jesus if he was really the One who should come, Jesus sent back the message which echoed Isaiah: think about what you have seen - “the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised” (Luke 7:22). These are indeed the hallmarks of the Kingdom of God, the signs of new life and a new wholeness.

It is hardly surprising that the first disciples after the resurrection, and then the early church, believed that through the power of the Holy Spirit they were empowered and authorised to continue Christ’s healing ministry. One of the earliest recorded examples comes early in Acts (ch.3) when Peter and John healed the lame man at the gate of the Temple, invoking the name of Jesus. By the time the epistle of

James was written some time in the second half of the first century AD it was clear that the church was teaching that sick people should ask the elders of the church to come and pray over them and anoint them with oil in the name of the Lord. Since that time the ministry of healing, generally with the laying on of hands and anointing with holy oil, has been one of the church's sacramental ministries. By the Middle Ages church authorities had restricted the ministry to priests and had even forbidden monks to offer formal healing ministry though almost certainly they continued to do so in many ways. Those of you who have read any of the Brother Cadfael detective stories will remember how Cadfael was skilled in using herbs as medicine, and restored to health many through his knowledge and his kindly listening in the privacy of his workshop. It may be fiction but it certainly reflected life and sickness as our medieval ancestors experienced it.

Healing as a formal sacramental ministry wasn't just clericalised. It also came to be associated in the western church with terminal illness and preparation for death, the so-called Last Rites, or Extreme Unction – in strong contrast to the gospel emphasis on healing as the gateway to fullness of life. It is not surprising that at the Reformation laying on of hands and anointing with oil disappeared from Anglicanism. It is still there in the first English Prayer Book of 1549 in a form for the visitation of the sick, along with the expectation of personal confession and communion from the reserved sacrament. But anointing and reservation of the sacrament had gone with the more Protestant prayer books which culminated in our Book of Common Prayer with its austere and wordy order for the Visitation of the Sick.

Renewed and serious consideration of a sacramental ministry of healing within Anglicanism began with the so-called Non-Jurors in the late 17th Century who refused to take the oath of allegiance to William and

Mary. It resurfaced with the Oxford Movement in the 19th century, with its emphasis on sacraments as a primary way in which God touches and transforms the lives of believers, and pours out His mercy and grace on ordinary life and on the hard places of sin, grief and sickness. But for most Anglicans the ministry of healing only really became main stream with the coming of *Common Worship* from 2000. In the volume of “Pastoral Services” there is a whole section devoted to Wholeness and Healing. It is a profound pity that lay people rarely see or use these volumes but have to make do with service sheets! This volume contains a theological introduction to healing, prayers for healing services and with individuals, and particular ministry to the sick. It is one of these forms which we use during our monthly Healing Masses. Anointing on the forehead and hands is accompanied by the prayer, “I anoint you in the name of God who gives you life. Receive Christ’s forgiveness, his healing and his love. May the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ grant you the riches of his grace, his wholeness and his peace.” The

provision of different rites of healing is reinforced by the comparatively modern celebration of a Chrism Mass in Cathedrals on Maundy Thursday when holy oils are consecrated and taken back to parish churches for use in baptism and healing. I heard of one Bishop who recently told his clergy that he expected them to use the oil of healing regularly and liberally – in fact gallons of it!

However and in spite of all this I rather suspect that many of those who know that the Ministry of Healing exists still assume that it is for emergencies only. The idea of “The Last Rites” dies hard. But the gospels testify that healing is about life, about the cascading grace of the Lord on those who come to him with their pain and hurt of body, mind and soul. I love the short Apostles’ Creed which we say at Morning and Evening Prayer – in part because it includes that little clause, “He descended into hell.” It echoes the belief of early Christians that Christ literally descended into hell after his death to rescue the lost souls, to “harrow hell”

and set its prisoners free. In the church of San Clemente in Rome there is an ancient fresco which shows Christ carrying his cross as a triumphal standard, and grasping Adam and Eve to rescue them and restore them to life in Him. The vision of the harrowing of hell reminds us that there is no place of darkness and desolation which is not part of Christ's dominion. His power and grace extend even there. So we should take seriously the offer of healing ministry by the church in the name of Christ. Not to do so is cutting ourselves off from one source of sacramental grace. It is in a sense to turn our backs on the offer of abundant life. It is refusing the touch of Christ in our times of distress and sickness.

Now of course we do not view laying on of hands and anointing as some form of magic. Nor do we believe that it replaces the God-given skills of surgeons, physicians, psychiatrists and psychotherapists. Nor indeed do we come asking for a dramatic medical cure or a sudden resolution to our problems. As with other

forms of intercession we do not, or at least should not, make demands of God or tell him precisely what he needs to do. We place our lives before him and at his disposal, however messy, sick and broken we may be, in the hope and faith that his touch will begin and continue the work of transformation and renewal we need. We come to the rite with faith – faith Jesus saw in the woman who touched him and in the desperate father of the dying child. Our faith is that we and our problems are enfolded in the love of God, and that in His mercy he will do with us what He wills, and that He will give us grace and strength to cooperate with him. We are in a real sense laying hold of our baptismal identity as children of God, as people within whom the Holy Spirit is at work. We come so that the image of God in which we are made may be renewed.

So I finish with a text from the gospel of St. John: *“I am come that that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly.”*