

A Reflection from Revd Ali for the 4th Sunday after Trinity ~ June 27th 2021

In our Gospel reading (Mark 5: 21 – 43) we hear the harsh and distressing words ‘Your daughter’s dead. Why bother the teacher anymore?’

What an incredibly cruel way to break the news of a death.

I can imagine that when the girl died, someone saying – ‘where’s her father? He ought to be told. Someone should get the message to him’. We would expect them to say something like ‘I’m really sorry, my friend. I’m afraid she’s gone. It’s too late.’

But not ‘why bother the teacher any more’. Our English translation softens the blow. The Greek word used colloquially here for ‘trouble’ or ‘pester’ or ‘bother’ literally means ‘to flay’, ‘to skin alive.’ Your daughter’s dead, stop flaying the teacher to come with you. Presumably, this cruel voice belonged to one of Jairus’ fellow leaders from the synagogue. Perhaps he was eager to put a stop to the scandalous nonsense of a respected religious leader, seeking the help of an itinerant preacher and so-called healer. Maybe the intention was to bring Jairus to his senses - ‘Come on Jairus, she’s dead. Start acting like a bereaved pillar of the community ought to, and stop behaving like a desperate idiot’. But of course he’s desperate. The death of a child is one of those nightmare scenarios that all parents fear. He will do anything, if it has any chance at all of helping his daughter.

Mark pairs Jairus’ desperation with the story of another desperate character, the woman with the haemorrhage. Not only has she been bleeding for 12 years - unpleasant enough in itself - but in her 1st century Jewish context, that meant that she had been ritually impure, for all that time. She couldn’t eat with others, she couldn’t share the same facilities as others. Her medical condition made her a virtual outcast, for 12 long years! And because of that exclusion, she has spent everything she had on a succession of ineffective doctors. Making her doubly excluded, because she was now economically destitute too. It is a story that is all too familiar today. Economic insecurity caused by furlough, job losses, inability to qualify for grants or loans. Benefit sanctions and the lasting impact of austerity leading to a downward spiral of poverty. It is frightening how quickly something like an accident or a chronic illness can lead to poverty and economic isolation. And we all know how those who get caught in this poverty trap are so often demonised by our tabloid society, as scroungers or worse. So that the woman’s experience of a nightmare, vicious spiral of illness, destitution and social isolation has such resonance today.

Jesus makes a point of asking who touched him. He understood her situation and declared her healed in front of the crowd. She didn’t need him to say that she was healed, if the physical healing was all that mattered. She had already felt that happen, she had felt a miraculous change in her body. But Jesus knew, as we can imagine, how much more was needed to restore her to wholeness. Perhaps, her social isolation for those 12 long years would have destroyed her confidence, made her feel worthless. Possibly, she had taken on-board the rejection of those around her. Maybe, that is why she didn’t dare to come openly and ask for the healing she longed for. Instead, she crept through the crowd to take it in secret. By asking the woman to identify herself, by touching her, raising her up and declaring her healed by faith. Jesus very publicly restored her to full membership of her society. Mark sandwiches these two stories together, intending us to use each of them to interpret the other. This pair of stories are part of a larger set of four miracle stories - with the calming of the storm, our gospel reading last week, and the man whose demons were exorcised and cast into the pigs. Mark puts these four stories together to showcase Jesus’ power to bring calm and wholeness in the face of our deepest primal fears. Natural disaster, losing our minds, illness, isolation and poverty, and even death itself. The sea symbolising the forces of nature, and the stories of the healings of a man, woman and child representing all of humanity.

Mark also gives us some very carefully constructed pairings within these stories. A healing of a child and an adult; a rich man contrasted with a poor woman; an insider, contrasted with an outsider. Jesus is very clearly being presented here as the one who brings healing and wholeness to all. Without regard for any of those man-made divisions, however important they may be culturally or socially.

Those today's stories, desperate people came to Jesus as a last resort. Hoping for a miracle. Though in both cases, their declaration of faith is not so much what they believe, or what they say they believe, it's the simple fact that they have come to Jesus. Their actions speak louder than their words. It doesn't even seem to matter how we come. Whether openly or in secret. Asking or simply taking what we need. The only thing that matters is that we come to Jesus.

Mark's gospel has two key themes. Christology, who Jesus is and discipleship, what it means to be people who follow Jesus. So Mark's pairing of these stories isn't just to make a point about Jesus having the power to bring wholeness to all who come into contact with him. It also gives us two very different examples of what can stop people from making that contact with Jesus. Examples of things that can get in the way of people receiving or accessing that wholeness that only Jesus can bring. It might be physical or economic factors like illness or poverty. Socio-psychological factors like social exclusion and isolation leading to a lack of confidence and fear of rejection. Or even fear of compromising our respected status by being seen to be too credulous. It might be the voices in our head or in the echo chamber or our social networks that make us doubt ourselves and our desire to come to Jesus' or to take the next step in our discipleship. It might be worth remembering, that it is the same range of factors that get in the way of people coming to church, and may possibly give us some insights as to how we can help overcome those barriers.

People who are not coming to Jesus are being stopped by something.

'She's dead. Why trouble the teacher anymore?'

That might be a voice in someone's family or friendship group 'there's no point going to church. It won't bring him back. It won't make any difference'. Or 'You don't really believe that nonsense, do you?'

Or it might be a voice inside your head stopping you asking God for help with something that's worrying you. Something that is destroying your peace of mind. Do you really think God's going to be interested in your problems, with all the troubles in the world? Or is it too late? For example in the case of climate change? Making poverty history? Sorting out the Anglican communion? We can all too easily feel that we are flogging a dead horse, or flaying the teacher.

But Mark's layering together of these stories, emphasises again and again, God's power to bring wholeness and calm out of chaos and brokenness.

Mark reminds us of Jesus's identity and nature as the one who brings wholeness, at the same time as reminding us of the call to be faithful to Jesus. He reminds us to keep coming to Jesus, to keep pestering God with our questions, to keep asking him to help us, even in situations that seem to be lost causes.

But more than that. Mark also encourages us to understand, and work to remove, the many and varied barriers that prevent others from doing the same. Jesus' invitation to us all is to simply come and see, it is up to us to help others do just that.

Amen.