

Sermon

Sudbury WPCU 21.i.18

Ex 15:1-17; R 8:12-27; Mark 5:21-43

Mark presents us with a story sandwich about two women. One is young, a mere child to us but in her culture on the verge of womanhood at the age of twelve. The other has been suffering from haemorrhages for twelve years. Both are in extremis – Jairus’s daughter is dangerously ill, on the verge of death. The other is perpetually ritually unclean because of her condition and therefore isolated and on the edge of society. She is desperate.

We first meet Jairus’s daughter in the desperation of her father. The whole country was moved last year by the lengths to which little Charlie Gard’s parents were willing to go to secure treatment that might help him. There is no desperation like that of the parents of a grievously ill child, and so it was that Jairus, a respected leader of the synagogue fell at the feet of Jesus, the rogue preacher from Nazareth. That tells us much about his courage and his singularity. Here was a leader of the Jewish people who realised who Jesus really was, and trusted him as hope in everything else was rapidly extinguished – ‘Come, lay hands on her, make her well.’

They are on their way back to Jairus’s house when a hand reaches out and touches the hem of Jesus’ cloak. Somehow, with almost supernatural prescience given the throng pressing around him, Jesus senses power go out of him, and he wheels round and confronts the jostling crowd until the poor, frightened woman owns up. Her life-story, the misery of twelve years bursts forth, ‘Daughter’, he says,

immediately engaging her in the relationship her condition had denied her, ‘your faith has made you well. Go in peace’.

That done, Jairus now presumably beside himself in anguish, the crowd surged on towards his house, high on trepidation, on the cusp of mourning and despair. And indeed, a message arrives, ‘She’s dead, don’t trouble the teacher any more’. The professional mourners have turned up already, the emotion notched up, the cacophony jangling. ‘Don’t be afraid’ Jesus whispers in Jairus’s ear. Taking Peter, James and John with him, he goes to the room where she is lying, and says in Aramaic, ‘talitha cum’, literally ‘Lamb, get up’. And she does.

What is Mark doing with this story sandwich? He is nothing if not direct and blunt. The young girl is dying and the woman who suffered from haemorrhages has a condition which eludes the medical profession. They’d emptied her bank account and left her worse than when she started. When Luke edited Mark’s story for inclusion in his gospel he quietly edited that bit out – protecting his own medical profession. But not Mark. These are realities which we prefer to leave to one side. Confronting what it means to be human like this is both emotionally draining and theologically perplexing. Why do twelve year olds die? Why is there chronic disease? Why was Charlie Gard’s condition incurable? In other words Mark brings us face to face with the raw edge of what it means to be human.

I would yield to no one in my conviction that the astonishing advances of medical science in our generation – the unravelling of the human genome, the steady pushing back of heart disease and cancer – is one of the great works of the Holy Spirit. But medicine will always have limits because we are creatures of space and time.

We age and we are mortal. That's why my hair has turned white and gravity is doing things to my body which are less than aesthetically pleasing.

Mortality – the haemorrhaging woman and numbed Jairus knew all about that. And so do we. There is a beautiful poem by the nineteenth century Jesuit poet Gerard Manley Hopkins. He watches a little girl called Margaret crying as the leaves fall from the trees in autumn. She will, he imagines grow immune to leaf fall as she grows older, yet still she will weep:

Now no matter, child, the name:
Sorrows springs are the same.
Nor mouth had, no nor mind, expressed
What heart heard of, ghost guessed:
It is the blight man was born for,
It is Margaret you mourn for.

That is what Mark is confronting. He is answering Margaret's mourning. And his answer is Jesus, and the way in which Jesus subverts normality. Mark does it by allowing us to catch theological echoes. Jairus asks Jesus to lay hands on his daughter so that 'she may be made well', but the Greek word he uses also means 'to save' and salvation.

When the woman touches the hem of his robe Jesus feels 'power gone forth from him', and the Greek word is the one that is used to mean the power of God. It is the Greek word that translates the Hebrew for God's creation and sustenance of the world, and also God's fashioning of history by leading his people out of captivity in Egypt through the exodus, rescuing them from Babylonian exile by raising up Cyrus and so on.

Salvation and the power of God are at loose as Jesus says to the haemorrhaging woman, 'Daughter' and to Jairus's daughter 'Lamb, get up'. It is an extraordinary juxtaposition. The gospel writers can't help but view the life of Jesus through the lens of resurrection, and that is what is going on here. What Mark is telling us is that the cross and resurrection of Jesus are the answer to all our questions about being human and living with mortality. He's not telling us its time to shut up the hospitals and close down the Crick Institute. Far from it. Haemorrhaging women and sick children are still with us, and they need them. But death has been faced down for the tomb was empty and he'd gone before to Galilee. The chains have been broken, and there is liberation, transformation, healing, life, the ending of death's tyranny and the monopoly of mortality. It is the answer to Jairus's anguish, to the woman's misery, and the longing of all of us who cry as Margaret cried, not over leaf fall, but over the endless litany of cruelty and sorrow of the world as power is hoarded, corruption glorified, untruth praised and the poor of the earth endure displacement, hunger, violation and violence.

And its not just us who groan for the dawning of redemption's dawn says Paul. With breathtaking insight in his letter to the Romans, he hears that longing singing its siren song through the whole of creation – trees, animals, winds, oceans, exploding stars and expanding galaxies, all groaning in labour, awaiting to be set free from its bondage to decay to enjoy the freedom of the glory of the children of God. Calvin said in his commentary on this passage that '...there is no element and no part of the world which, touched with the knowledge of its present misery, is not intent on the hope of resurrection.'

We are, as it were, in solidarity with creation itself, as the Spirit groans within us, waiting for the final outworking of what God has already accomplished in the death and resurrection of Jesus. The good news, as Mark's two women bear witness, is that Jesus' world has erupted into ours. That Friday when the sky turned black. That Sunday when they came to anoint a body and found a hole in history. That was the game changer. Where is he? Gone before, gone to Galilee, walking the Emmaus Road. Let loose from the bondage of decay and mortality, drying Margaret's tears.

Time and space are no longer limitations but the raw material of resurrection life, hid with Christ in God, our limitations now through Christ woven into the very being of the Godhead. As Charles Wesley so dramatically realised, long his imprisoned spirit had lain the shackles of sin and mortality, but then

I woke, the dungeon flames with light,
My chains fell off, my heart was free,
I rose, went forth, and followed thee.

The bonds of slavery have been smashed and swords by some divine alchemy are being fashioned into ploughshares. It should not surprise that it is so, on that grand cosmic scale, for the vanquishing of death and mortality was foreshadowed in the liberation of Israel from the brickyards of Egypt and the tyranny of Pharaoh. Our first reading, the song of Moses in Exodus 15, celebrated the victory of God's right hand in one of Israel's great hymns. Some speculate that verse 11:

Who is like you, O Lord, among the gods?
Who is like you, majestic in holiness,
Awesome in splendour, doing wonders?

was the earliest of Israel's confession of faith, the deep ancestor of our creed. God's right hand is glorious in power. The God who is on the side of the poor and put upon is victorious and just. And this isn't just naked power, it is rather God's power in working out 'steadfast love'

In your steadfast love you led the people whom you redeemed;
You guided them by your strength to your holy abode...
You brought them in and planted them on the mountain of your own possession,
The place O Lord that you made your abode..

Release from bondage, from slavery in Egypt. The Song of Moses earned a special place in the hearts of the Christians of the Caribbean, and they offer it back to us in the material for this Week of Prayer for Christian Unity. They saw in the liberation of the Hebrew slaves a template for God's love for their ancestors, caught in the grievous horrors of the slave trade on the sugar plantations, for the gospel was not only entwined in the rhetoric of their enslavers, but was also the energy of the liberation movement. And it speaks to them still as they wrestle with the Hydra of the world economic system and the vice of debt servicing. The right hand of God is indeed moving in their land. As Doreen Potter, a Caribbean Methodist hymnwriter put it

The right hand of God
Is lifting in our land,
Lifting the fallen one by one;
Each one is known by name,
And rescued now from shame,
By the lifting of the right hand of God.

Lifting us too, out of our complacency into the worldwide company of the people of God. Lifting us out of the chains of convention and ordinariness, into the kingdom of the one who called the outcast, unclean woman 'Daughter' and Jairus's weak, sick little girl, 'Lamb'. He lifts you and me into his company, into the true catholicity of those who know Christ, and invites us to discover what unity with fellow Christians in Sudbury, in England, across the world, and in the communion of saints past and to come might mean. We share the life of Christ, we live his kingdom in the world of 'not yet', our lives are hidden with Christ in God as he dries Margaret's tears and turns our flesh and blood, time and space, relationships and aspirations into the raw material of resurrection. In that kingdom, Paul told the Galatians, Christ has broken every barrier down - no longer Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female, for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. There is just the new humanity in Christ, the community of those who point to the empty tomb and follow him to Galilee. Amen.