

Sermon to St James' Church, King Street, Sydney

The Reverend Andrew Sempell

Rector of St James

Sixth Sunday after Pentecost

(b-os13)

29th June 2018

Readings: 2 Samuel 1:1, 17-27; Psalm 130; 2 Corinthians 8:7- 5; Mark 5:21-43.

"Living by faith in a world of hurt"

The 'Play Within a Play'

Act three of William Shakespeare's play 'Hamlet' contains an intriguing literary device described as a 'play within a play', and which Hamlet calls 'the Mousetrap'. It is through the acting out of his father's death that Hamlet hopes to reveal that it was his step-father Claudius' who killed the king.

The clever aspect of having this play within the play is that it serves to emphasise the culpability of both Hamlets' mother and stepfather in the old king's murder. It is a theatrical device that Shakespeare employs so that members of the audience may become witnesses to the king's murder and thereby reinforce that something is truly rotten in the state of Denmark.

As I have said many times before, Mark's Gospel strikes me as being more of a drama (or play) than a narrative, so it is unsurprising to find that Mark employed the device of a 'play within the play' in today's gospel reading. The passage involves a story concerning a healing, which is interrupted with another story about a healing. In the midst of responding to a cry for help from a distraught father on behalf of a sick child, a woman reaches out and touches Jesus' garments so that she too may receive healing. Thus, while *en route* to heal one woman, Jesus heals another. This double story serves to emphasise the main theme of the passage, which is the healing power of Jesus.

In first century Palestine, little was understood concerning the scientific nature of disease and the need for health management. Diseases were often seen to be the result of evil spirits or possibly sin. Thanks to the rise of medical science we have gained a better understanding of these things. Nevertheless, the grief and fear that illness brings remains constant. Disease, and its ultimate outcome death, continues to be a negation of the goodness of life and we are inclined to rail against it. We therefore still understand the need for healing. But back to the text.

The Healing of the Woman

The writer of Mark's Gospel often 'sandwiches' stories inside other stories in order to develop key points. In this instance, the in-between story is about a woman who reaches out to Jesus after she has tried everything else in her efforts to be healed of chronic, long-term haemorrhages. The haemorrhages have rendered her not only bankrupt but ritually impure in the eyes of the community.

This woman therefore has much to overcome in terms of social and ritual taboos, (as well as her own fear), in order to reach out to Jesus. As Jesus said to her after she had been healed; it was her faith that made her well.

Reaching out in faith seeking wholeness and restoration, despite the risks and obstacles involved, is a major theme in the gospel reading. Likewise, is the presence of God's Spirit in Jesus that empowered him to heal.

The woman's recognition of Jesus' divinity is reflected in her fear of being discovered as the one who touches Jesus' clothes. The Bible recounts many instances of fear and awe being experienced by people as they face God's presence. Here the woman falls at Jesus' feet – perhaps she was in awe of the divine that she recognised in him. Mark's Gospel often portrays ordinary folk as recognising Jesus' divinity rather than the inner circle of the disciples or the religious leaders of the day.

The Healing of the Daughter

Likewise, the synagogue leader Jairus also falls at Jesus' feet pleading with him for his daughter's healing. This behaviour is quite remarkable for a religious leader. Just as the woman overcame social obstacles to do what she did, we may also recognise that Jairus too had to overcome some powerful obstacles of his own.

As a leader in the synagogue, Jairus would have been accustomed to people throwing themselves at his feet and begging from him, rather than the other way around. Here, he had to set aside his concerns about power and status to reach out to Jesus and ask for help.

Jairus recognised his need for God and therefore turned to Jesus. Despite the news of her death, and perhaps the general anger and frustration that people may have felt at the delay in Jesus arriving at his house, Jesus nevertheless restored the girl to life.

Human desperation crosses all social and political boundaries. None are immune from fear, despair and suffering. These stories tell us that wholeness and healing come at the moment of the acceptance of our vulnerability, which leads to a humble desire to seek God in the midst of the difficulties of life. That is what happened to both Jairus and the woman.

The people in this story are like many of those who are either sick, in need, or grieving - they move from lament, through faith, to hope, and restoration. They demonstrate that faith in God can give people enough hope which can then encourage action.

The Expression of Grief and Vulnerability

How might this be worked out in a practical way? During my time in the Army I spent much of my time engaged with people suffering from the effects of Post-Traumatic Stress (or PTSD as it is known). It is a common experience among those who serve in the Defence and Police Forces, in the emergence services, and many of the caring professions.

PTSD arises from the experience of an incident in which a life is threatened or lost or where there is great injury. The underlying emotions are often an ongoing sense of powerlessness, fear, pain and grief. The beginning of learning to live with PTSD requires recognition of the experience that caused it and acknowledgement of the reactions and grief that flow from it.

Grief is a basic and powerful human experience – indeed, it is ‘normal’. Today’s Old Testament reading from 2 Samuel is a powerful statement of public grief. King David produced this lament as he grieved the death of his friend, Jonathan and Jonathan’s father, Saul. It is an expression of raw emotion that recognises human powerlessness and vulnerability, while railing against the human condition that brings suffering and death.

David, Jairus and the woman all called out to for restoration and wholeness. They all lamented yet also had the courage to make their feelings and their needs known. This is the beginning of the journey to restoration and wholeness. It is sometimes only at the point of recognising our need and vulnerability that God can act in our lives. It is at this point that our faith in God can begin the process of transformation.

The Role of Faith in a World of Hurt

Faith allows us to see the difficult events of life from a different viewpoint – a perspective of hope and love, even in the midst of despair. Faith is the means by which we reach out to God; recognising that, as in the story of the prodigal son, God is already reaching out to us.

In hearing humanity’s cry of despair over sickness and death, God responded through Jesus; who lived, suffered and died, but rose to new life as a sign of hope in a world of hurt.

The message within the message of today is that we, too, have a part to play in this process of healing. For if we open our lives to God, we too can become conduits of God's healing touch in the lives of others; thereby becoming part of the flow of life and wholeness streaming out from God to the whole creation.

This is the incarnational response, for while we have our own needs for healing, we are nevertheless called by God to continue the ministry of Christ by being Christ to the world; we are therefore also called to be 'healers of souls' through faith.

*God of grace and mercy,
we give thanks for your faithfulness and steadfast love.
Whatever troubles come our way,
whatever obstacles we face on our journey towards wholeness,
may we find our hope in you. **Amen.***