

*of life and death*  
a sermon preached on the  
*fifth sunday after pentecost*  
28 June 2015  
at  
*st john's*  
ANGLICAN CHURCH CAMBERWELL  
*by Dr Muriel Porter*

Lections: Lamentations 3:22-33; Psalm 30; 2 Corinthians 8: 7-15; Mark 5: 21-43

Last Sunday's Gospel reading – the account of Jesus calming the storm on the Sea of Galilee – began with Jesus and his disciples “crossing to the other side”. In his sermon the Vicar pointed out that this was not just factual reporting of the disciples' movements – it was deeply symbolic of their need, our need, to make a crossing to the ‘other side’ – to venture out in faith – if we are to enter into the liberty of the kingdom of God.

Today's Gospel reading also begins with Jesus and his disciples crossing the lake once more. Did you notice? “When Jesus had crossed again in the boat to the other side, a great crowd gathered around him; and he was by the lake”. It is so easy to see that sentence as no more than simply telling us about the physical location of what is to come. Now we have been alerted to the symbolism of those lake crossings, however, we are primed to understand that the healing stories of today's reading are also primarily about the coming of the kingdom of God among us.

So with that in mind, let us enter the stories themselves, and explore the lineaments of the great Good News of that kingdom they disclose.

Two stories are interlocked here. Firstly, there is the story of Jairus, a leader of the synagogue, who begs Jesus to save his little daughter from death. He falls at Jesus' feet and begs him *repeatedly*, we are told. This man, highly respected in the community as a religious leader – and remember, it was the religious leaders who rejected Jesus – is so desperate for his daughter that he threw himself on Jesus' mercy.

Secondly, the story of the woman with the haemorrhage, from which she had suffered for 12 years. Let's be very clear about the of this woman's illness: she had suffered from continuous menstrual bleeding for all that time. Any woman in the congregation will know what that must have been like! Apart from anything else, the poor woman would have been severely anaemic. And we are told she had spent all that she had seeking medical assistance, but to no avail. Clearly she must once have had considerable financial resources even to seek medical help. But now her condition had grown worse and she was reduced to poverty.

Her disease would be terrible even today, and hard to control without, in the process, prolonging its side-effect of preventing child-bearing. But in the first century world, not to be able to give birth was a grave stigma for any woman. And worse, continuous bleeding in this way rendered her permanently unclean, ritually and socially. She was unable to participate in any religious rituals, rejected from society, and probably rejected by her husband as well. No wonder she was on her own in the crowd, at a time when women did not go out in public without a male protector. No wonder too that she could not speak to Jesus, or even fall at his feet and beg his assistance, as Jairus had done, for she was a woman and women did not speak in public to men to whom they were not related. She was immensely courageous even to touch the hem of his cloak, given she knew that, because she was regarded as “unclean”, she should not have been touching anyone, let alone a man. All in all, she was the ‘living dead’.

So her healing by Jesus was far more than restoration to health and fertility, as significant as this was. It was restoration to the fullness of life. She was redeemed in every sense of the word, the moment she felt herself healed, even before Jesus sought her out. And Jesus did seek her out. Although his disciples were dismissive of his seeking to know who she was, he persisted – “he looked all round” to see who had touched him. We are told she responded “in fear and trembling”. Scholars say that her fear was not timidity, but possibly the awe of one who knows she is approaching the holy. And the holy one of God, ignoring the

multiplicity of social and religious taboos that separated them, names her as nothing less than ‘daughter’ – *daughter*. For her, the psalmist’s words were fulfilled: *The Lord listened and had pity. The Lord turned her mourning into dancing.*<sup>1</sup>

Jesus tells her that her faith has made her well. Here, faith is not some abstract commodity demanded by a phoney televangelist healer, but rather ‘trust’. Jesus recognizes that she came to him in trust; she trusted that he could heal her. Trust and compassion is what creates the healing relationship between Jesus and the woman.<sup>2</sup>

It is also trust that sees the restoration to life of Jairus’s daughter. Trust on the part of Jairus, who comes to Jesus in his abject despair, who listens to Jesus rather than those who tell him there is no hope, and who presumably also ignores the derision of the wailing mourners who scoff at Jesus.

Can you see the parallels here with the earlier story? The little girl is 12; the woman had suffered haemorrhages for 12 years. The girl is actually not all that little in first-century terms. At 12 she is technically a woman, ready to be betrothed, married and to enter her child-bearing years. The woman in the crowd could not bear children; the girl dies before she can do so. Like the woman, she is also restored to full life; she too is ‘saved’.

And in saving her, Jesus breaks more taboos – touching a dead person, which would render him ritually unclean, and touching a woman of marriageable age, which was socially unacceptable.

What a kingdom this kingdom of God’s is! Where old religious rules and social taboos are set aside. Where women are no longer second-class, but are fully honoured and called ‘daughter’, no less. Where life in all its fullness, all its freedom, is brought out of death, figurative death as well as literal death. A kingdom where people can be released from their fears and enabled to step outside all that prevents them from living as no less than sons and daughters of the living God.

And a kingdom that’s hallmark is compassion. Compassion literally means “to suffer together”. It means sharing another’s suffering so as to want to relieve it. How powerfully Jesus demonstrates compassion when he heals. He heals not to make a name for himself; in fact, it is the last thing he wants. The Gospel tells us that he “strictly ordered” the little girl’s family, and his own disciples, not to tell anyone about her healing. He healed her for her sake, not for his. And took his compassion one practical step further, when he told her awe-struck family to give her something to eat!

So what is at the heart of the Good News we have heard this morning? That the kingdom of God is with us, that the kingdom rejects all the old rules and taboos that restrict life abundant, and that compassion, new life, liberty and trust are at its centre. We can trust that if we will only reach out in faith, daringly, and touch the hem of his garment, we too will have our mourning changed into dancing, we too will be restored to fullness of life as daughters and sons of the Holy One.

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<sup>1</sup> Psalm 30

<sup>2</sup> Rowan Williams, *Meeting God in Mark*, SPCK London, 2014, pp.33-34.