

the purity of love
a sermon preached on the
sixth sunday after pentecost
1 July 2018
at
st john's
ANGLICAN CHURCH CAMBERWELL
by dr muriel porter

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

The two stories in today's Gospel reading are deeply moving.

Who could not be moved by the story of the little girl raised to life? Imagine the joy of her parents, who had been so grief-stricken by her illness and death. They had been so distressed that her father, a synagogue official, ignored his status and fell abjectly at the feet of Jesus, begging him repeatedly to heal his daughter. To the religious leadership in general, Jesus was a nobody, a Galilean healer disturbing the peace by upending their religious rules and therefore their power. But Jairus's daughter obviously meant much more to him than those political concerns.

And the second story that comes in the middle of the account of Jairus's daughter. For centuries Christians have been deeply moved by the healing of this poor woman, simply by touching the hem of his garment. Her simple yet profoundly faithful action symbolises our longing to come close to Jesus and find our own healing. It symbolises too those fleeting moments on our faith journey when we have actually felt close to our Lord, and felt our pains and sorrows dissipate.

The two stories are so familiar, so heart-warming, that we can miss the significance of something they have in common.

Let's look at the woman who approaches Jesus in the crowd. We are told she had been suffering from a haemorrhage for 12 years. Let's not be coy. The haemorrhage was continuous menstrual bleeding – for 12 years. A terrible affliction for any woman, now as then. Apart from anything else, the poor woman would have been severely anaemic.

Her disease is terrible even today, and still 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, both ritually and socially. Religious rules from the book of Leviticus¹ stipulated that menstruating women could not participate in any religious rituals. In first century Judaism, a woman at her time of the month was not supposed to go out in society either.

The unnamed woman who approached Jesus had quite possibly been rejected by her husband because of her illness. 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 that she dared not speak to Jesus initially, or even fall at his feet and beg his assistance, as Jairus had done, for 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 strange man. All in all, she was the 'living dead'. And her touch rendered Jesus ritually unclean.

Nevertheless, he sought her out. He knew healing had happened. And the holy one of God, ignoring the multiplicity of social and religious taboos that separated them, praised her faith, and named her as nothing less than 'daughter' – *daughter*. He would not allow the purity rules to stop him accepting, healing and loving a human being in real need.

The Gospel then returns to the earlier story, about Jairus's daughter. The little girl had died by the time Jesus reached her, but he restored her to life by taking her by the hand. Once again, Jesus'

¹ Leviticus 15: 19-33

action in taking the dead child by the hand broke yet another ancient purity rule. The girl, you see, was actually not all that ‘little’ in first-century terms. At 12 she was technically a woman, ready to be betrothed, married and to enter her child-bearing years. For a strange man to touch a woman of marriageable age was unacceptable. And in touching a dead body, he was once more rendered ritually unclean.² Again, Jesus ignored the purity rules for the sake of a human being in need.

When religions create purity rules – and most religions do – they do so as a means of reinforcing the religion’s separateness and its holiness from the surrounding society. The Jewish people created a vast array of rules about what was clean and unclean, both in terms of food and the body. Jewish people are forbidden to eat pork, for instance, because it was declared unclean in the book of Leviticus. These rules developed considerably when the Jewish people were in exile in Babylon in the sixth century before Christ. The rules were a means of ensuring that they kept their separate religious, cultural and racial identity in a foreign land. The rules were badged as a means of keeping themselves holy – that is, faithful to the God of their religion, but also to their own identity.

Initially Christianity abandoned the concepts of clean and unclean, of holiness achieved through food or bodily purity. Remember that Jesus declared that defilement came from inside a person – from the heart – rather than from external factors like food, or washing, or bodily functions. St Paul echoed his views. But it did not take long for the Church to create its own purity barriers. For instance, a seventh-century Archbishop of Canterbury ordered that “women shall not in the time of impurity enter into a church, or communicate”. Still today, in some Orthodox churches, women are expected to keep away during this time.

And the early Church imposed a myriad regulations about sexual activity even within marriage, and treated women as potential contaminants. So clergy were forbidden to marry from the fourth century on because, the argument went, close contact with women would defile them. The clergy had to be seen as holier than the laity.

The Church of England changed that rule in the 16th century Reformation, thank goodness, but nevertheless imposed others. Remember the Anglican Church’s harsh rules against divorce and remarriage not so long ago? How a single, childless woman could join the Mother’s Union but not a divorced mother? Thankfully that has changed too. But for a long time these rules kept Anglicans effectively separate from the society in which they lived.

And that is what is happening now with gay people. As our society has progressively accepted gay people, including same-sex marriage, to the point where you can now buy engagement and wedding cards for same-sex couples in any newsagents, hard-line conservative forces in the Anglican Church are ramping up their opposition to fever-pitch.

While the federal same-sex marriage legislation says clergy are free *not* to marry gay couples, the conservatives are insisting that they are not free to marry them if they want to – and many do. And they must not even bless them, or even potentially attend a secular same-sex wedding. Whatever is claimed by the conservatives, this is actually an old-style purity push to enforce our separateness, our greater holiness, from the people we live and work with – even in some cases, from our own children and grandchildren. It is a power play, and is making the church a complete no-go zone for gay couples, causing immense pain and suffering to many people, some of them very close to home as you will see from the letters page in today’s edition of *TMA*.

Jesus did not allow arbitrary purity rules to stop him offering new life – literally – to a little girl and, figuratively, to a very sick, isolated and abandoned woman. As the psalmist said, he changed mourning into dancing. Or as the book of Lamentations put it, he had compassion according to the abundance of his steadfast love. Human need, human flourishing, was his only criterion. May it also be ours.

² Numbers 19:11