

St Mary Abbots, Trinity 1, Matins

Genesis 24:1-27

Mark 5:21-43

In our second reading this morning Jesus heals two women. They are very different women, but curiously related in the way Mark tells his story.

A leader of the synagogue comes and falls at Jesus's feet and begs Him to come and lay hands on his daughter to heal her, for she is at the point of death. She is, we later find out, 12 years old.

On the way however, our other woman throws herself at Jesus's feet. While the girl has had 12 years of life, this woman has had 12 years of bleeding, vaginal bleeding which cannot be staunched. She is therefore unclean, and even touching her would make anyone else unclean according to the Jewish Law. Unlike Jairus, she is not given a name. Unlike him, with his large household, she must, we assume, live on her own, separate from society in isolation.

In our day that might be hard to imagine, but I remember meeting an albino woman with AIDS in Zimbabwe, who lived in a hut outside her village in a similar way, only housed through the charity of the church, but an outsider nevertheless.

The man in our story is rich, but our nameless woman is poor through paying doctors who have only made her worse.

Jesus is rushing to Jairus's daughter, and the slightest delay could lead to her death. And this woman touches His cloak, and it seems as though everything stops – in her separation, she has attempted to make contact in the way least likely to contaminate Him, no doubt agonising first, as she tells herself, *'If I but touch His clothing..'* Her healing does not seem urgent – she has been ill for so long; certainly not compared with the girl, who has her whole life before her, and seems a more hopeful case than this hopeless woman on her knees.

For me I think one of the most extraordinary things in this story is not the healing, but that, despite His being rushed to go and heal Jairus's daughter – and despite this woman already being healed in her touching of His cloak – Jesus stops, and is eager to seek the one who has reached out to Him. She has touched Him – this great act of faith. After all her pain and desperate misery, she has had hope and trust in change in the presence of Jesus. Though she has touched Him and been healed, without the need for a personal exchange, He *'looked all round to see [her].'* He would see her. Not in anger, but in love.

The disciples ask, How could you feel the touch of one woman in this pressing crowd? But He would see her too. And as with all gospel passages, listen for the detail: she *'felt in her body that she was healed,'* falls down before Him in fear and trembling, and tells Jesus *'the whole truth'*. Yes, she tells Him what she has done – that she has touched Him; but now that she has been healed – changed - deep inside, she proclaims the Truth.

How must this have resonated for those earliest Christians, whose lives had been changed so radically by Jesus, and who were proclaiming the Truth at risk of their lives? And Jesus, with the intense gaze that is so redolent in His words to her, calls her *'Daughter'*, as He says, *'your faith has made you well; go in peace.'* And as he has been paying attention to her, giving her total attention, Jairus's daughter has indeed died. *'Why bother the teacher any more?'* they say to Jairus.

Yet there is grace enough for both of these women. *'Do not fear, only believe.'* *'Do not fear'* – Jesus's most common command. And He addresses her too, in the same intimate way He

addressed the other woman, '*Little girl, get up!*' and shows His tender care towards her, as she begins to walk about, by telling them to get her a little something to eat.

Now, on one level, I hate to go from this beautiful story back into our own world with a bump. It feels rather sordid; but that is, we are told, the job of a preacher. To open the word of God up, and to help us apply it, to live it.

I also tread with trepidation because I feel I must address the letter which all of the bishops in the House of Lords wrote to the Times this week, regarding the removal of asylum seekers to Rwanda. Trepidation, not just because you might disagree with me, but because I am very aware that the pulpit is something of a privilege, which I am keen not to abuse – and that it is very difficult to answer back while I'm up here, though please do afterwards.

But I believe that Jesus's way of responding to those whom He heals gives us the model for how all of us should respond to those in need. In the personal contact, love and attention which flows through the gospel, particularly to the outsider. To those whom no-one else loves.

And indeed, in our first reading, we are told that Abraham's servant is given one criterion when searching for a wife for Isaac: that she will offer her jar of water to him, and offer to water his camels. In other words, that she will be kind to the stranger, without knowing who he is. The Old Testament constantly reminds the people of Israel that they were once strangers in the land of Egypt, as indeed was the Holy Family itself.

I do not dispute that the numbers risking their lives and dying to cross the Channel gives rise to a very difficult problem, but using people in need as deterrents, rather than seeing them as individuals, cannot be the answer; and the bishops of our church are right to see it as their duty to speak against it.

I was speaking to someone the other day who was keen to help refugees herself, particularly from Ukraine, but who also referred to the 'illegals' crossing the Channel. These people's claims have not however been processed, and we hear that one of those removed from last week's intended flight was an Iranian policeman, who had been sentenced there for refusing to shoot anti-government protesters. It is not to advocate an open borders policy to see it as our Christian duty to make proper assessments of those arriving, and to give proper care to those entitled to it under the Geneva Convention.

This week is Refugee Week, and we have been offering what care we can here in Kensington to those fleeing Afghanistan and Ukraine. We have been doing that not just by giving accommodation and basic necessities, but by learning people's names and giving them our full attention, by hearing their stories, by gently sitting alongside them and doing what we can to help with their healing, as slow as that will necessarily be. Such care, and even integration into our community, is not something that can be contracted out to others, aside from the additional trauma visited on those who are already traumatised.

Some would have our Christian faith limited to a vague warm individual spirituality, but in Christ's healing of those in need – both of the insider and of the outsider – we see the way which we are all called to, each of us individually, and we as a community: in His looking to see those who reach out to Him, to *really* see them; in His addressing them by name; in His giving of peace and healing; and in His feeding of them with His very self, as He feeds all of us.

For in His eyes we are all in the same need; and when we feed one who is hungry we feed Him who is the Bread of Life; just as in so doing we do His work. Amen