

Readings for the Fifth Sunday after Pentecost

27th June 2021

First Reading: 2 Samuel 1:1,17-27

After the death of Saul, when David had returned from defeating the Amalekites, David remained two days in Ziklag. David intoned this lamentation over Saul and his son Jonathan. (He ordered that The Song of the Bow be taught to the people of Judah; it is written in the Book of Jashar.) He said:

Your glory, O Israel, lies slain upon your high places! How the mighty have fallen! Tell it not in Gath, proclaim it not in the streets of Ashkelon; or the daughters of the Philistines will rejoice, the daughters of the uncircumcised will exult.

You mountains of Gilboa, let there be no dew or rain upon you, nor bounteous fields! For there the shield of the mighty was defiled, the shield of Saul, anointed with oil no more.

From the blood of the slain, from the fat of the mighty, the bow of Jonathan did not turn back, nor the sword of Saul return empty.

Saul and Jonathan, beloved and lovely! In life and in death they were not divided; they were swifter than eagles, they were stronger than lions.

O daughters of Israel, weep over Saul, who clothed you with crimson, in luxury, who put ornaments of gold on your apparel.

How the mighty have fallen in the midst of the battle! Jonathan lies slain upon your high places. I am distressed for you, my brother Jonathan; greatly beloved were you to me; your love to me was wonderful, passing the love of women.

How the mighty have fallen, and the weapons of war perished!

Second Reading: 2 Corinthians 8:7-15

You excel in everything—in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in utmost eagerness, and in our love for you — so we want you to excel also in this generous undertaking.

I do not say this as a command, but I am testing the genuineness of your love against the earnestness of others. For you know the generous act of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich. And in this matter I am giving my advice: it is appropriate for you who began last year not only to do something but even to desire to do something— now finish doing it, so that your eagerness may be matched by completing it according to your means. For if the eagerness is there, the gift is acceptable according to what one has—not according to what one does not have. I do not mean that there should be relief for others and pressure on you, but it is a question of a fair balance between your present abundance and their need, so that their abundance may be for your need, in order that there may be a fair balance. As it is written, “The one who had much did not have too much, and the one who had little did not have too little.”

Gospel: St Mark 5:21-43

When Jesus had crossed again in the boat to the other side, a great crowd gathered around him; and he was by the sea. Then one of the leaders of the synagogue named Jairus came and, when he saw him, fell at his feet and begged him repeatedly, "My little daughter is at the point of death. Come and lay your hands on her, so that she may be made well, and live." So he went with him.

And a large crowd followed him and pressed in on him. Now there was a woman who had been suffering from haemorrhages for twelve years. She had endured much under many physicians, and had spent all that she had; and she was no better, but rather grew worse. She had heard about Jesus, and came up behind him in the crowd and touched his cloak, for she said, "If I but touch his clothes, I will be made well." Immediately her haemorrhage stopped; and she felt in her body that she was healed of her disease. Immediately aware that power had gone forth from him, Jesus turned about in the crowd and said, "Who touched my clothes?" And his disciples said to him, "You see the crowd pressing in on you; how can you say, 'Who touched me?'" He looked all around to see who had done it. But the woman, knowing what had happened to her, came in fear and trembling, fell down before him, and told him the whole truth. He said to her, "Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace, and be healed of your disease."

While he was still speaking, some people came from the leader's house to say, "Your daughter is dead. Why trouble the teacher any further?" But overhearing what they said, Jesus said to the leader of the synagogue, "Do not fear, only believe." He allowed no one to follow him except Peter, James, and John, the brother of James. When they came to the house of the leader of the synagogue, he saw a commotion, people weeping and wailing loudly. When he had entered, he said to them, "Why do you make a commotion and weep? The child is not dead but sleeping." And they laughed at him. Then he put them all outside, and took the child's father and mother and those who were with him, and went in where the child was. He took her by the hand and said to her, "Talitha cum," which means, "Little girl, get up!" And immediately the girl got up and began to walk about (she was twelve years of age). At this they were overcome with amazement. He strictly ordered them that no one should know this, and told them to give her something to eat.

A Reflection for the Fifth Sunday after Pentecost

Travelling about this week, I was intrigued to catch a trailer on the radio for a series of programmes that will be aired in the coming week called *The Kindness Experiment*. Looking for further information, I came across the following description: 'Can we turn bad vibes into good vibes? A feel-good series about the kindness of strangers and the generosity of the human spirit. And guess what? Kindness is catching.'

I shall be interested to hear what it has to say. I'm a bit wary of it being described as 'a feel-good series' - it almost implies to me that there is something a bit false about it, as if it's to make me feel good when perhaps that is not entirely justified. And yet I certainly believe that kindness to others, friend or stranger, is vitally important, and that the human spirit can indeed be generous.

Last week, we heard the Gospel story of Jesus calming the storm on the lake, and I reflected on the fears and storms we face in our own lives, and how nothing can separate us from the love of God. This week, the Old Testament and

Gospel readings describe people who were suffering in different ways, and I would like to think about more about our response to suffering, of which kindness is a part.

In today's Old Testament snapshot of some of the events in the history of Israel, we hear David's lament over the death of King Saul and his son, Jonathan. Saul and Jonathan died in war, Saul by falling on his own sword after being wounded. Despite the fact that David had been persecuted by Saul, who was jealous of David's success and popularity, and although David had been anointed as God's chosen successor to Saul, David also recognised that Saul himself had been appointed by God and he lamented his loss. He expressed his anger and resentment, his grief and sense of loss, and his love. He didn't try to explain why this had happened, or what God's reasons or purposes might have been; he simply expressed his feelings. These are feelings we can probably all identify with in the face of loss and, especially, tragedy. In today's society, when tragedy strikes, a common response is to demand an explanation – an identifiable cause and possibly someone to blame – but answers are not always available or possible. Lament remains a legitimate response for our own losses and suffering but also for those of others and of the world.

The Old Testament contains many examples of lament, including in the psalms. One such is the psalm set for today, Psalm 130. It begins: 'Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord. Lord, hear my voice!' We can almost hear the anguished tone of the psalmist calling on God to listen to him, but it then moves on to express trust and hope, recognising that 'with the Lord, there is mercy'. 'Mercy' here is sometimes translated as 'steadfast love'.

In our Gospel reading, we are told of Jairus, and see the suffering of a parent whose child was dying, and by inference also the suffering of the child. This account is interrupted by that of the woman who suffered from haemorrhages. The two are in stark contrast. Jairus was a synagogue leader, a man of status and probably wealthy. The woman was unnamed, insignificant and poor. But both turned to Jesus as their last hope and had life-giving encounters. The woman was told that her faith had made her well. When Jairus was told that his daughter had died, Jesus told him 'Do not fear, only believe'; in other words 'have faith'.

Such accounts of healing miracles can be hard for those who are suffering, especially those who are ill and for whom there is no cure. My mother struggled with that. Sometimes we have to hang onto our faith with gritted teeth. As with the story of the storm on the lake last week, this is not about how much faith we have. But it does make us think about our response to suffering and how we might all contribute to healing. And that brings me back to kindness.

For me, and I suspect for many, kindness is an outward expression of love, and as Christians, it is also an expression of our gratitude for God's love to us. Jesus responded to those suffering with loving kindness. And it is in that same loving kindness that we should respond to suffering in the world, remembering that we are called to love our enemies and those we don't particularly care for, as well as our friends and family.

Love should be expressed in action as well as in thought – there are some things we can do about suffering in the world. In the passage from the second letter to the Corinthians, St Paul speaks of generosity being an expression of love. Paul had instigated a collection amongst the Gentile churches for the poor of Jerusalem who were suffering from both famine and persecution. He had organised a regular collection but the divisions and arguments in the Corinthian church had disrupted this. So it is that Paul reminded them of the generosity of Christ in coming to earth for their sakes, and that their response should likewise be generous, so that, as he said, 'there should be a fair balance'.

We don't have to look far in the world today to find suffering of many different types. There are the big issues: war, political oppression and injustice, global poverty, unjust trade, the effects of climate change, discrimination of many sorts. In our own communities, there are among us those who are poor and marginalised as the woman with haemorrhages was, who are fearful and anxious for loved ones as Jairus was, who are grieving as David was, or who struggle or suffer in other ways.

None of us can solve all these problems. But healing can come in different ways and mean different things for different people. Just as some are called to be medical professionals to bring physical healing, others are called to political activism or diplomacy and peace-making to bring healing to international relations, and yet others work to find green energy solutions to bring healing to the global environment. Healing can also be peace of mind, acceptance by others, a chance to be listened to, and we all have our part to play. Responding to others with kindness, extending the hand of friendship, attempting to resolve disagreements, acting with generosity, thinking seriously about how we steward our resources of time, talents, and money, reducing our over-consumption of resources and our carbon footprint – all these things and others can contribute to the relief of suffering, and to healing in the world. Whilst I am sure we all do many of these things, it can be a good idea to take stock every so often and to consider where we might make improvements.

We are Christ's hands in the world today, so let our hands be hands of Christ's loving kindness that bring healing and wholeness. The perhaps we will be catalysts of kindness for, as the trailer for the radio programme said, 'Kindness is catching!'