

Readings for the Sixth Sunday after Pentecost

30th June 2024

First Reading: Wisdom of Solomon 1:13-15, 2:23-24

God did not make death, and he does not delight in the death of the living. For he created all things so that they might exist; the generative forces of the world are wholesome, and there is no destructive poison in them, and the dominion of Hades is not on earth. For righteousness is immortal.

For God created us for incorruption, and made us in the image of his own eternity, but through the devil's envy death entered the world, and those who belong to his company experience it.

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 lake. 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 Sixth Sunday after Pentecost

Last week we thought about the issue of suffering in the context of the story of Job. The question of suffering, and particularly of unjust suffering, is beyond human explanation. God doesn't tell us either, but assures us of God's presence with us, which was all that mattered to Job.

In today's readings we continue that theme of suffering. In our Gospel reading, we meet two people in desperate need, the synagogue leader Jairus, and the woman with haemorrhages, who both turn to Jesus in the hope that he might be the one to help, and who get so much more than they anticipated.

The stories of Jairus and his daughter and the woman with haemorrhages are woven together by Mark by the use of parallels and contrasts. Jairus is a named man, he is wealthy, with a respected place in society, and approaches Jesus publicly. The woman is an unnamed woman, she is poor, she would have been ostracised by society because of her condition, and she approaches Jesus secretly. Two women are healed, one twelve years old, on the cusp of adulthood, the other having suffered for twelve years. The healing of the woman with haemorrhages is made public, but the healing of Jairus' daughter is in private, and his family are told to tell no-one. What is this about?

Jairus is a leader of the synagogue, a reminder at the start that not all Jews, or Jewish leaders, were opposed to Jesus and his ministry. We are told he 'saw' Jesus, an expression that, in Mark's Gospel, often signifies spiritual perception beyond simply seeing. And he is a desperate man – he pleads for help, begging repeatedly that Jesus will come and make his daughter well, being 'made well' also having spiritual as well as physical implications.

Jesus went with him, but the story is interrupted by the solitary, silent figure of the unnamed woman in the crowd. The length of her suffering is emphasised, and has been added to by the treatment she endured, which also impoverished her and left her worse than at the start. Like Jairus, she has some insight into who Jesus is – she had 'heard' about him, suggesting more than just hearsay, and she recognised that just a touch would be enough to bring about healing. And it was – immediately she knew she was healed. What she had not reckoned on was that Jesus would feel the healing power go out of him and call her out publicly. She told him the whole truth, there in front of the crowd, and received his blessing of peace.

Meanwhile, Jairus was kept waiting while Jesus stopped to attend to this least likely recipient of his attention, in terms of position in society. We aren't told what Jairus thought about this but, while he is waiting, comes the news

he must have dreaded, that his daughter had died. Had his one chance been lost? But God's compassion and power are not limited, so Jesus urged Jairus to believe, not fear.

The healing of Jairus' daughter took place in private. Only Peter, James and John were invited to go with Jesus, albeit that there was a group of professional mourners at Jairus' house, which would not have been uncommon for wealthy people. Jesus asked them why they were weeping, saying that the girl is asleep not dead. Not surprisingly they laugh at him; but Jesus' question is not about the diagnosis of death but whether or not they have faith in God's power. Jesus then went into the house and, without anything dramatic, using everyday language, spoke to the girl and she responded. We are told she walked about and was given something to eat, indications that she was fully recovered.

It seems slightly absurd to us that her family were told to say nothing as it would shortly become apparent to all those outside that she was alive and well. Jesus instructed those he healed to say nothing on a number of occasions, yet at other times he urged people to speak freely, and there was nothing secret about the woman's healing earlier. Some commentators suggest that Jesus wanted the good news that he brought to be proclaimed by the marginalised, such as the woman with haemorrhage, rather than by privileged people like Jairus or even his disciples.

Both Jairus' daughter and the woman with haemorrhages began life anew after their dramatic encounters with Jesus and are examples of God's power to transform, restore and resurrect life. But, just as last week, for many of us they raise another difficult question: Why are some people healed and others are not? There were a great many people suffering all sorts of ailments in Jesus' day, yet only a few were healed. The woman was told that her faith had made her well, yet we do not believe that those healed were the only people of faith in need, and we probably all know people of great faith who are not healed of their illnesses. It is another question that God does not choose to explain to us, and it can be really hard to trust God in the face of adversity. It is never the case that, if someone does not receive physical healing, the sufficiency their faith is in question, or indeed that, if someone is healed, that their faith must be superhuman. But, as we heard last week, God assures us of his presence and asks us to trust him.

The purpose of the stories we have heard today is not to try to explain the miracles of Jesus, but to reveal Jesus' divine power. Last week, in the account of Jesus calming the storm on the lake, we saw his power over the forces of nature. In the passage of Mark's Gospel that comes between last week's reading and this week's is the story of the healing of the Gerasene demoniac, demonstrating his power over the forces of evil. And today we have seen his power to heal and to raise to life. These passages show us that no-one is beyond God's reach and invite us to be amazed at God's power to act in times of fear, despair and hopelessness.

As our brief reading from the Wisdom of Solomon today reminds us, death, and by extension suffering, was not God's plan. As it says, 'God created us for incorruption, and made us in the image of his own eternity...', and that will be the reality when God's Kingdom comes to its fulfilment. Meanwhile, we all have those times of despair and hopelessness, times when, like the people from Jairus' house, we are tempted to say 'Why trouble the teacher any further?' Jesus' response to us in those times, is to invite us to cry out, to invite us to name our troubles before him, to invite us to trust in God's power and presence, that ultimately all things will be made well.

Furthermore, we should recognise that we all have a role to play in continuing Jesus' healing work in the world, sharing his compassion and love. This is something alluded to in the reading from Paul's second letter to the Corinthians. Paul was raising funds amongst the Gentile churches for their poorer counterparts in Jerusalem and urged the Corinthians to play their part as a sign of their love and generosity. He makes it clear that it is not about letting some people off and making others feel guilty, or about giving more than can be afforded, but about fairness; about sharing one's abundance to relieve the suffering of others. It is to bring a measure of healing to their situation. As individuals and as a nation, that is, perhaps, something to ponder this week as we approach the General Election.