

Be like Christ

Psalm 30

Mark ch 5 v21-43

You don't need to be particularly observant or alert to the signs around us to know that there are many whose lives are ones of desperation.

The murder and abuse of young children is a scourge, which has become all too familiar on our news bulletins. Incurable diseases touch the unsuspecting, and sometimes the particularly good people.

There is mourning and a sadness that runs as a thread through so many families.

Some are ignored and lost and forgotten about because they are all too inconspicuous to matter. I'm sure each one of us here today can put faces and names to all the scenarios I've just mentioned.

The worlds of desperation and religious purity often encounter each other, and sometimes, religion can make the desperation worse. Like the Pharisees, the Christian church can be guilty of having similar traits.

Very often, the perception of people outside the church is that it is judgmental and against everything that is good and enjoyable.

The church comes over as a dour place with dour harsh, hypocritical people in it.

Unfair, you may be thinking, but that is a perception that the church throughout the world must work on.

It remains a great source of hope that Jesus himself would have nothing to do with these attitudes, but always sought to bring light into dark situations.

Today's reading, is dominated by people who are desperate, all of whom need a faint glimmer of light in what is a very dark world.

Let's look at the case of Jairus for a moment. Or rather Jairus' daughter and the sick woman.

Like many TV series on now, we have two stories running alongside one another. Now in these TV series, the writers do this for dramatic effect, to keep us on the edge of our seats. Mark however, though he was the "page turner" of the gospel writers, doesn't need to heighten the drama unfolding.

Both these stories would stand alone on their own merit. He didn't need to add dramatic impact. So, we can only conclude that these are the events as they actually happened.

The man was the ruler of the synagogue. This would make him a person of some importance and respect in the community.

I don't know this for sure, but I suspect that he would have been a stickler for the rules – not necessarily in his private life – but certainly where the synagogue was concerned.

All in all, he would have been the last person to approach Jesus for many reasons. But he did. Something must have happened to him for this to come about.

You see, he would have his preconceptions or prejudices about this fellow Jesus. Prejudice means judging beforehand. A judging before the evidence has been examined.

Before we condemn the man, we should give him a fair hearing.

It is something we all have to struggle against in our daily lives.

When James Simpson discovered that chloroform could be used as an anaesthetic, especially in the case of childbirth, - chloroform was held to be, and I quote, “a decoy of Satan, apparently opening itself to bless woman, but in the end hardening them, and robbing God of the deep, earnest cries, that should arise to him in time of trouble.” I didn't tax myself too long wondering if it was a man or woman who wrote that. A prejudiced mind shuts out a person from many a blessing.

The man threw himself at Jesus' feet. Again, that must have taken something for a man of his standing to do that.

He laid aside his pride and came to the Lord Jesus. We don't like being indebted to anyone else, do we? If we had a choice, we would run our life on our own. One of the first steps of the Christian life is to realize that we cannot be anything other than indebted to God. One of the marks of a Christian is to accept help from others graciously. We often focus on it being better to give than to receive, but there comes a point, if we take the argument to its extremes, that it becomes ridiculous. No one accepting anything, each intent on giving.

We sometimes see this happening with friends each trying to pay for the coffee they've just had in a café. “I'll pay. No, no, - let me pay!” kind of thing. There is a time for giving and a time for receiving. May God grant us the wisdom to know which is which! Just a wee point to note, that the man came himself, he didn't send a servant or messenger. Unusual for a father to leave a child, who is at the point of death, I think. This could mean that he was desperate, - or no one else would go. Whatever the reason, here was a man who forgot everything except that he wanted the help of Jesus.

At this point we go to our other tale about the woman who had been ill for a number of years.

This story is worth much deeper consideration than we can give it today, But the story is such though that we cannot ignore it.

It is a story that speaks of persistence and courage or going against the odds. She had tried all the conventional treatments to no avail. Her trouble was embarrassing, so it is understandable that she would not wish to state it openly in public, and because of the issue of blood, she was ritually unclean, and so she decided to try to touch Jesus in secret. She came to Jesus as a last resort; having tried every other cure available. Many come to Jesus that way, driven to Christ by force of circumstances. Even if that is the way we come, then Jesus will never send us away empty.

When she touched Jesus, he was aware that someone had touched him. Amazing that in a crowd, he knew that someone had touched him. This suggests to us that there is a cost to healing and Jesus was prepared to pay that price of helping others. When confronted, she confessed to Jesus the whole truth and you can almost sense the relief that brings.

So as the story of the ill woman is drawing to a close, the tale of Jairus' daughter comes back into the frame. We rejoin the tale as news of the girl's death reaches Jesus. Mourning was in progress. Now the mourning then is not as we know it today. Even allowing for the passage of time and a different country and culture, it seems strange. There were pages and pages of instructions detailing how to proceed. Clothing had to be torn in a certain way and after a certain number of days; it was then allowed to be sown up. The mourners engaged in a wailing and often flute players joined in the cacophony.

The wail of the flutes, the screams of the mourners, the passionate appeals to the dead to somehow respond, the rent garments, torn hair must have made a Jewish house a poignant and pathetic place on the day of mourning.

This story of the girl is a story of contrasts. There is the despair of the mourners and the hope of Jesus. From, "Don't bother the teacher," they said. There's nothing anyone can do now." To Jesus response. "Don't be afraid, only believe." In the one place, it is the voice of despair that speaks: in the other, the voice of hope. There is contrast between the unrestrained distress of the mourners and the calm sincerity of Jesus. They were weeping and wailing and tearing their hair and rending their garments in their distress; he was quiet and serene and in control. Why this difference? Well, it was due to Jesus perfect confidence and trust in God.

The great fact of the Christian life is that what looks completely impossible with men is possible with God. They laughed Jesus to scorn, but their laughter must have turned to amazed wonder when they realized what God can do. There is nothing beyond facing, and there is nothing beyond conquest – not even death – when it is faced and conquered in the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord. So, we have looked at two different stories but like those TV series, there is a link between them.

Today's reading is dominated by people who are desperate, all of whom need just a faint glimmer of light in what is a very dark world. Jairus, the synagogue official, does the unthinkable by falling on his knees before Jesus, because he is desperate. A long-suffering haemorrhaging woman, whose name by contrast, we are not given and who therefore remains anonymous, does the unforgivable by touching Jesus, thereby contaminating him and making him ritually unclean.

Jesus then compounds his ritual uncleanness by touching the body of a dead girl. Jesus is caught up in a nightmare for any purist, because all ritual purity is scandalously flouted.

Sometimes a person may turn to religion out of a desire for magic and miracle.

Though being a person who brings light into the darkness, Jesus is no soft touch. Some may see the haemorrhaging woman in today's reading as treating Jesus a bit like a mobile relic: just to touch Him would do the magic. Jesus, though, will have none of this.

He seeks her out, he wants to look into her face, he wants to know who she is, and he wants her to tell her story. Real healing requires relationship.

One of the tragic side effects of the evil of sexual abuse, especially in the sexual abuse of children, has been the need to be circumspect about touching anyone. Teachers, carers, social workers, clergy are all under suspicion if they are too physical with children – or anyone else for that matter. Though perfectly understandable, given the reality of events, this is tragic because there is something particularly healing, consoling, and affirming about touch.

In today's reading, Jesus both touches and is touched by the untouchable: a dead child and a ritually impure woman. Today's Gospel reading offers the challenge to do as Christ would do despite the possible cost to ourselves.

Amen.