

Sermon: Sunday 28 June 2009

Suffering

Reference: Mark 5:21-43

Did you notice? One woman stole a blessing.

A pubescent girl had no say in the matter of her healing.

A public leader gives up probity for the sake of his child, falling at the feet of the healer and asking repeatedly for help.

A woman who shouldn't be out in public who has tried all conventional means to get well, who has been ripped off by the health system, is desperate and strong, determined and trusting.

'If only I touch' she thought... and she did, and she was – healed.

That's enough...

but there is more.

She is exposed and tells the whole truth and the healer affirms what she already knows. "Go in peace, your faith has made you well. You are healed."

She stares after him amazed... but he is still on his way to the leader's house; the leader who also trusts; to the young woman who knows nothing of all this – linked to that other woman by her age – 12 years – and the 12 years of blood.

So now we have a stolen blessing and one asked for by someone else.

How fortunate is she, the girl, to have someone trusting for her. When there is trust, it seems, healing happens... sometimes.

Why is it that sometimes our prayers, our cries, our desires go unanswered?

On the confirmation camp, Scott (from his wheelchair) asked "Did God make me like this?"

Why do bad things happen to good people?

These are very real questions that are not easy to answer. Alongside the hope and healing of today's reading, I reflected on this. John Taylor (in 'Weep not for me – Meditations on the Cross and the Resurrection' p11f), writes *'some months ago I was asked by a friend to visit a young couple whose two year old daughter had been found dead in her cot. They were still stunned and haunted by the old question, why?, and sometimes 'why her?'. I simply could not offer them the conventional reassurance about it all being in God's providence, a mystery now but one day to be seen as part of a loving plan. I knew that many good souls derive lasting comfort from such counsel, and it certainly squares with a good deal in the Bible, and is to be found in many books of devotion and pastoral practice. But to me it has become unconvincing and strained and suggests a picture of God I find impossible to love, arrogant though that sounds.*

I said to them instead that their child's death was a tragic accident, an unforeseeable failure in the functioning of the little body; that so far from being willed or planned by God, it was for God a disaster and a frustration of his will for

life and fulfilment, just as it was for them, that God shared their pain and loss and was with them in it. I went on to say that God is not a potentate ordering this or that to happen, but that the world is full of chance and accident and God has let it be so because that is the only sort of world in which freedom, development, responsibility and love could come into being, but that God was committed to this kind of world in love and to each person in it; and was with them in this tragedy, giving himself to them in fortitude and healing and faith to help them through. And their child was held in that same care, suffering love.

Perhaps there is another way. Maybe God does not cause suffering. Maybe it happens for some reason other than God's will. Maybe God doesn't decide which families shall give birth to a handicapped child, maybe God didn't single out a particular person to have a mental illness or a degenerative disease. But rather God stands ready to help them and us cope with our tragedies if we can get beyond the feelings of guilt and anger that separate us from God?

Perhaps "How could God do this to me? Why me?" is the wrong question. Though 'why?' is often more a cry of pain and saying "I am hurting" than a question.

Rabbi Kushner writes: We all suffer but I believe suffering does not come from God. Perhaps it is comforting to believe in an all-wise, all powerful God, who guarantees fair treatment and happy endings, who reassures us that everything happens for a reason – but it causes us to blame ourselves or others and takes no account of innocent victims.

When we have met suffering, when we have been there, we can not believe in that sort of God any longer without giving up our own right to feel angry, to feel we've been treaded badly by life.

Our pain is none of God's doing so we can turn to God for help. Our question then is not "God why are you doing this to me but instead "God, see what is happening to me. Can you help me?"

We can turn to God, not to be judged or forgiven, not to be rewarded or punished, but to be strengthened and comforted and healed even.

Bad things often happen – they just happen. Sometimes they can be explained by our genes or our choices; sometimes by the laws of nature. Nature treats all alike and does not make exceptions for nice people. Nature is morally blind, without values and there is nondamness in the universe, some things happened for no reason. But why do we feel pain? It is nature's way of warning good nd bade people that something is wrong.

All of us experience suffering at some time or other, because we are human and can feel.

I believe God does not cause suffering, neither does God always alleviate our pain, but God stands with us through our grief and sadness, offering hope and a

resting place. We too are called to stand beside, to fight against injustice, to offer friendship.

I suppose there is some suffering which is unnecessary and you and I can do something about it. With the others we feel more helpless.

I was talking with a friend this week and this is what he said. "When I am feeling down or depressed I do not want solutions, quick fix-its, glib or even well-meaning answers. I want you to sit beside me, to hear my pain, let me cry or rage. I don't want you to try and make me feel better. Just let me cry."

Henry Nouwen in the book "The Wounded Healer" suggests that we create a space where others can find their own soul. (p92). *That we walk beside.* "Why is this healing ministry?" he asks. *Because it takes away the false illusion that wholeness can be given by one to another.*

It is healing because it does not take away the loneliness and the pain of another but invites him or her to recognise her or his loneliness on a level where it can be shared.

When we become aware that we do not have to escape our pains, but that we can mobilise them into a common search for life, we do not blame, but seek God's presence then those very pains are changed from expression of despair into signs of hope.

So, a Christian community can become a healing community not because wounds are cured, the dead brought to life, and suffering alleviated, but because wounds and pain become openings or occasions for a new vision for growth.

Real community arises when sharing of pain takes place, not as a stifling form of self-complaint, but recognition of God's saving promises.

In 'Stories from the Edge – A Theology of Grief' (2008, p116), Gary Garrett writes:

Life is shaped of loss, from the moment we leave the warm darkness of the womb and enter this bright loud world. Everything changes, even if we want it to stand still, even if we believe it is standing still. We lose our illusions, we lose possessions, we lose those who matter to us, we lose our physical capabilities, and, eventually, we lose our lives. Everything changes, and eventually, no matter who we are or how many toys we have, we will lose everything that is keyed to this physical world. It is how we deal with those losses that ultimately matter, and that is why without a resilient story that incorporates continuing change, we ourselves are lost.

And that should not – must not – happen in a universe established by a loving God. Review your stories for false premises and faulty plots; seek a story that incorporates suffering but encourages hope; stand alongside those who suffer, who grieve, whose stories have fallen apart. This is the good work that is given to us today.

Henri Nouwen argued that in the Christ-event, especially in the liturgical cycles that we celebrate as the universal church each year, every story that matters can be understood. In Advent, Christ is coming; in Lent, Christ is suffering; in Holy Week, Christ dies, in Easter, Christ is risen; in Pentecost, Christ sends his Spirit into the world. We can understand our experience through this circle of birth, suffering, death, rebirth, and service; it is, as Nouwen notes, "the only story ever told. It is the story from which all other stories receive their meaning and significance. The story of Christ makes history real.

Whatever challenges may loom as we face suffering in this life, we serve a God of hope, a Christ who, as the Celts (and Nouwen) realised, has walked the path before us. And knowing that, hope and life can be placed into the story of suffering and death as its ultimate end, even if we cannot yet see how that might come. Jurgen Moltmann writes "Whenever life is perceived and lived in community and fellowship with Christ, a new beginning is discovered in every end. What it is I do not know, but I have confidence that the new beginning will find me and raise me up. May this promise of new beginnings in every ending be strength for your journey.

So we keep telling the stories; we stand alongside each other; we work for change; we hope; we trust.