13th in Ordinary Year B

Readings: 2 Corinthians 8:7-15; Mark 5:21-43

i

In today’s excerpt from Paul’s *Letter to the Corinthians*, he is urging them to get on with the collection for the famine victims back in Jerusalem whom they had promised to help previously, but in the intervening time there had been a fractious relationship between Paul and the Corinthian church and even when Titus visited to try to revive their interest and their loyalty to Paul, he had not had a good time of it.

Paul believes they should be generous to their fellow Christians suffering in Judea because Christ has been generous to them. Paul has abandoned the Jewish idea of tithing. Law has been replaced by grace. “I am not laying down rules,” he says, and adds in verse 12 that “people should give on the basis of what they have, not on what they don’t have.”

Jesus also spoke of tithing in disparaging terms by criticising the Pharisees for tithing their cumin and their mint, and fulfilling the Law, yet completely ignoring the spirit of the Law which is grace and generosity and thankfulness.

The new law for Christian giving is no longer a legally fixed amount such as a tithe; the only law for Christian giving is generosity. Be generous within your means, as Christ has been generous to you. As Paul goes on to say, “God loves a cheerful giver” (2 Cor 9:7).

Paul does not want to take from those who are already hard-pressed (v13), but he believes those with plenty should help those in need, for one day the tables might be turned and those currently wealthy may be the ones in need. Mutual help is the new equality Paul commends.

I confess that my interpretation of tithing is at odds with what the Church has said about it in past generations and in some churches to this day.

ii

Our reading from Mark’s gospel today features that well-loved story of Jairus’ daughter and the woman in the crowd who touches Jesus’ robe for healing. It is a demonstration of the sort of generosity of spirit that we have just seen inspired Paul’s plea to the Corinthians.

Jesus has returned to the Galilee side of the lake where some of the people in the synagogues and towns are already beginning to show hostility to Jesus – as in those who chunter against him after he has declared the forgiveness of sins to the man lowered through the roof (Mark 2:7), or after seeing him eating with tax collectors (Mark 2:16), or after seeing his disciples pluck ears of corn in the field on a Sabbath (Mark 2:24), or question him over whether his power comes from Beelzebub (Mark 3:22).

So Jairus, as leader of the synagogue, is taking a risk by asking Jesus for help. He could even have been among those previously questioning Jesus’ authority. But now, in his desperation, he comes to Jesus for help. Perhaps this is why Jesus tells Jairus and his wife to tell no one what he has done when he raises their daughter in order to protect Jairus from other members of the synagogue who might turn on him for having gone to Jesus for help.

When Jairus first approaches Jesus, he says his daughter is dying. Jesus needs to come as quickly as possible. Yet Jesus is delayed by the woman in the crowd who has been bleeding with a gynaecological problem for twelve years.

The woman touches Jesus’ robe in fear, but also in faith. Her medical condition would have made the woman an outcast; even within her own home her husband was not supposed to have had sexual contact with her for all those years and family members should have refused even to sit on the same stool as she had used.

The detail that she has spent all her money on doctors may indicate, however, that she was widowed, otherwise her husband or son would have been responsible for the money. Once wealthy, she was now in dire poverty and still no better, with possibly no family to support her and ostracised by the community because of her condition. She wasn’t dying like Jairus’ daughter, but her situation was almost as desperate.

She has possibly made matters worse for herself by touching a man in public; this is why she tries to do so in secret. Her desperation has prompted her to take a huge social risk. Her reputation as well as her money might well be gone at this point.

Jesus, however, gives her permission retrospectively for her physical intimacy by calling her, ‘daughter’. She is accepted as part of Jesus’ surrogate family and such physical contact is no longer a scandal within the family. He also affirms her faith.

This affirmation of her faith may well have been of benefit to her; perhaps she would not otherwise have understood the momentous statement she has made by going to Jesus in such a situation and nor understood the implications for her life if Jesus had not enabled her to acknowledge her own faith in this way.

She has been healed by power that has been transmitted from Jesus to her, but this is not disembodied cosmic power residing in the universe for those who know how to tap it; this is power from Jesus and transmitted through a personal faith in him.

Her physical healing was just the outward, visible sign of an inward, existential healing – just as it was for the man lowered through the roof in Mark 2. For the paralytic, getting up on his feet was demonstration that his sins had been forgiven by Jesus. The woman rises to her feet, the word play of rising to one’s feet and rising up in resurrection should not be lost on us, and Jesus says to her: ‘Your faith has healed you. Go in peace; be whole from your plague (v34).’ The verb ‘to heal’ and ‘to save’ is the same. She is made whole from her ‘plague’ – a word used in Jewish circles of the time to denote sins and all the evils deriving from sin.

To call the woman out is certainly a help for Jairus, who may well be reassured that Jesus will indeed be able to help his dying daughter also, if this woman in her state has found healing through her faith. Jairus has likewise just broken the social rules as leader of the synagogue by prostrating himself at Jesus’ feet and pleading with him, a mere carpenter’s son (v22-23). It assures Jairus that Jesus accepts him too, whatever the previous tensions between Jesus and some of the synagogue people. He too is being accepted as ‘family’.

But what must Jairus have thought when messengers come from his house to tell him that his daughter is dead? Did he suddenly resent the time Jesus had taken over this woman? Had she not intervened and distracted Jesus, then perhaps Jesus would have made it to his daughter in time?

Jesus steps in immediately to quash any such thoughts: “Don’t be afraid; just believe” (v36). Jairus learned in that moment that the woman had not robbed his daughter of her chance for healing. He did not have to resent her, or assume that Jesus was limited in who or how many he could assist.

When the locals mourning the child’s passing hear Jesus claim that she is only asleep, they openly mock him. Removing those without faith from the house, Jesus takes with him the child’s parents who have turned to him and three of his disciples as witnesses. When the girl rises from her death bed, Jesus instructs her parents to give her something to eat. This mirrors Jesus eating fish and bread before his astonished disciples (Luke 24:30, 41-43). It is a way of demonstrating the girl is truly alive again.

iii

There are a number of aspects to this story that should speak to us today.

If we may assume that Jairus had earlier been on the side of those synagogue officials who were voicing discontent with some of Jesus’ actions, we may learn from this episode that Jesus bears no grudges.

We may have had a distant or even hostile relationship with Jesus in the past, but we do not need to be shy in coming to him in our hour of need. Jesus is ready to receive us and accept us into his family of faith.

The crowd also saw that Jesus welcomes those of some social position, such as Jairus, as well as those from the lower rungs of society, like the woman who was an outcast due to her condition. Jesus treats them as equals; need is all that counts, not worldly status.

We can also see that we should not place limits on what Jesus can do. Those who came with the news that Jairus’ daughter had died did not think it worth troubling the teacher further. How prone are we to setting limits on what we think God can handle?

So if Jesus was walking down your street later today, would you have the courage to acknowledge your need? Would you believe taking your trouble to Jesus would be a good thing to do? Do you think yourself either too clever to admit your desperation, or too insignificant for Jesus to be interested in your little problem? Today’s gospel tells us to come, just as we are, and leave the rest to Jesus.

**Rev Dr Trevor Hoggard**

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