

God of wisdom, grant, we pray, that the words we have heard today may be grafted in our hearts so that they may bear much fruit for your Kingdom; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Today's gospel is one I have a great deal of fondness for, not least because it was the Gospel reading for my first ever sermon 27 years ago. But this gospel also appeals to me because I believe it speaks to the heart of where we are as a nation and in the wider world, as we think about how we deal with each other as human beings on this planet in a divided and uncertain world.

The story we have before us today, which is really two stories in one, are the final stories of what is known as the "miracle section" of Mark's gospel. The reading begins with Jesus and the disciples returning to Jewish territory. This is shown not only by the trip back across the lake which Jesus and disciples had crossed in last week's gospel reading, but also by the presence of a leader of the synagogue. His mission in both territories was the same – to seek out, heal, and restore those who are most vulnerable, whoever they were and wherever he found them.

And he comes back to Jewish territory to find three very different people from different stations in life, yet all united in helplessness. Jairus, a leader in the local Synagogue who by gender, position, and status enjoys a level of power and prestige, yet who is reduced to the painful impotence every parent feels when a child is sick. The second is a woman pushed to brave the crowd and its potential hostility in the hope of touching the healer passing through her town. And the third is a little girl wasting away with only hopes and prayers to surround her.

And Jesus responds to each of them in the same way: with compassion. This is in spite of the fact that his contact with them would make him ritually unclean. The law of Moses regarded three forms of uncleanness as serious enough to exclude the infected person from society. These were leprosy, uncleanness caused by bodily discharges, and impurity resulting from contact with the dead. And yet Jesus is not fearful of these people, or of touching them, or of them touching him.

His response to the woman who had been suffering from haemorrhages for twelve years is particularly poignant. Because she was ritually unclean, she could not enter the Temple and she could not touch or be touched by anyone without making them unclean too. By the time she approached Jesus, she had spent every penny she owned, and "endured much under many physicians" to find relief, but to no avail. This woman was an outcast, an embarrassment and so it might have remained if the woman hadn't in a desperate and stunning act of defiance, disobeyed the religious rules of her day to touch Jesus, "for she said, "If I but touch his clothes, I will be made well." She believed it so strongly that she risked breaking all the ritual and societal rules about cleanness to follow what she believed to be true.

Yet for some reason Jesus wanted to know who it was that touched him. Jesus turned about in the crowd and said, "Who touched my clothes?" The disciples, as usual in Mark's gospel, don't understand: "You see the crowd pressing in on you; how can you say, 'Who touched me?'" Yet Jesus knows that amid the commotion one person in particular is in need.

The woman however is afraid and trembling. She was most likely afraid because she had been found out: of having the "truth" revealed. Yet Jesus does not want to embarrass or humiliate this woman. Jesus is not content to dispatch a miracle; he wants to encounter a person. Jesus insisted that the woman, came forward and told her "whole truth." The woman had spent twelve long years having other people impose their narratives on her, their interpretations, their assumptions, their prejudices. She had been shamed into silence by her own religion. Jesus knew how desperately she needed someone to listen, to understand, and to bless her "whole truth" in the presence of the community. And in doing so the woman was restored to dignity and to her own humanity. After she told her truth, Jesus said He said to her, "Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace, and be healed of your disease." Jesus doesn't simply respond to those in need at a distance, but he connects with them, and joins himself to them through his compassion.

As if to emphasize this for us, Mark immediately has messengers from Jairus' house say the exact opposite of what Jesus has just said to the woman. They say "Your daughter is dead. Why trouble the teacher any further?" However, Jesus overhears and ignores the messengers and encourages Jairus, "Do not fear, only believe." This reminds us of last week's gospel of Jesus' words to his followers after he calms the storm. Once again, touch is important in this story, as Jesus takes the girl's hand and literally raises her to new life. Again, this story ends as did last week's with everyone completely amazed. But once again, it is important not to get side-tracked by the "miraculous" element of the story. The real story here is about relationship with Jesus. In Jairus's story, Jesus demands that we not pronounce death where he sees life. In the bleeding woman's story, he demands that legalism give way to compassion. In each story, Jesus touches what was considered "unclean" in order to practice compassion and mercy.

There are times of late that I have been left dejected not simply by our national insensitivity to vulnerability, but by the words of those who suggest that compassion should be seen as weakness. Compassion for the most vulnerable in our world has been replaced by cruelty and "zero tolerance."

We however worship a vulnerable Messiah who responds instinctively to human need, a Saviour who always and everywhere sees, cares, heals, and restores those who are most helpless, a Saviour who also invites us to see ourselves as those for whom he reaches in healing and then sends forth in compassion into the world.