

Sermon for Sunday 28th June: 'In touch with Jesus' by Mark Pilgrim

Last week a remarkable thing happened at the 9.45 service. At the end of the administration of communion I looked over to the far right hand corner – and there was a queue of people waiting to receive the laying on of hands for healing. This was a first. It hadn't happened before. This was, I am pretty sure, the first time this ministry had continued beyond the post-communion prayers and into the final hymn.

What was the reason? Was it Trevor's excellent, vulnerability-encouraging sermon? Was it that we had flagged up the possibility of praying in this way more than once during the earlier part of the service? Was it a combination of these things or something completely different?

Whatever it was, something was clearly happening. Trevor began his sermon by encouraging and inviting us to encounter God in the course of our worship that day – and encounter God, in the power of the Spirit and in the name of Jesus, clearly people did.

And this Sunday that invitation and that expectancy is here again. And the theme that Trevor focused on – namely: in the middle of life's storms, God can bring peace to those who turn to him – actually appears again in today's Gospel. In our reading from Mark chapter 5 we have two storm-tossed people.

First we meet Jairus – 'a ruler of the synagogue'...an important man, of high status, well able, we imagine, to be able to send servants to obtain the services of this itinerant healer. But such is Jairus' anxiety, such is Jairus' need – to save his daughter from death – that he comes to Jesus in person. Jairus actively seeks Jesus out and, revealing the depth of his need and his perception of Jesus' power – what does he do? He falls at Jesus' feet, begging Jesus repeatedly to lay his hands on his daughter that she might be made well and live. Jairus seeks personal contact with Jesus – that Jesus might literally be in touch, through his hands, with his daughter.

But as Jesus goes off with him – what happens? Another storm-tossed person enters the story. This time it's not an important, high-status man but a poor, marginalised woman – a woman who had had enough wealth to pay for doctors in years gone by but who has now undergone 12 long years of ritual uncleanness and separation from normal society. It's clear there's something a bit special about the way this woman actively seeks contact with Jesus. Mark, the Gospel writer, tells us more than once that just a touch of Jesus' clothes will, the woman believes, be enough for God to heal her. And Jesus himself confirms this assessment – because it is just a touch of the hem of his clothing that is enough for him to feel power go out to heal her.

What's going on here? It seems to be something special – what is it? Well, yes, there is something special going on here – and it becomes clear when we understand that the Hebrew word for 'hem of a garment' – 'kanaf' – is exactly the same as the word for 'wing'...the word which appears in Malachi 4.2 when the author of the last book in the Old Testament prophesies "the Son of Righteousness – the Messiah – will rise with healing in his wings – his 'kanaf'."

So Mark and the synoptic Gospel writers who include this story in their account are making a profound, a special point about this woman seeking contact with Jesus. We are all being invited to see (if we know Hebrew) that this poor, impoverished, ritually unclean, outcast woman truly believed Jesus to be the Messiah – and had the faith to seek him out, to be in touch with him – especially to touch the hem, the wings of his garment...for in them, she believed, because of Malachi, was divine wholeness and healing. So this unnamed woman is a second person who, like Jairus, actively seeks contact with Jesus in order to experience God's transforming power.

Can such a thing – does such a thing happen in our own day? Is it possible, by pro-actively seeking to make contact with Jesus to experience God's transforming power? Let me tell you two occasions when this has happened to me.

The first was over 20 years ago, when I was Vicar of Bedminster Down. A couple in their 50's had a daughter in her later 20's who had a life threatening heart and circulation condition. There was every likelihood that, if Louise didn't take care not to put her body under stress, she would die in her mid 30's. If she didn't put her body under stress, she might live somewhat longer, though with an ever reducing quality of life. One thing she was advised not to do was to get pregnant.

So – what did Louise do? She got pregnant! She couldn't bear not to have the fullest experience of humanity and give birth to someone she could and would love until the end. And give birth she did – and her daughter actually went to Red Maids School – and I used to see her and her grandparents in this church at Red Maids Carol services for a number of years. But Louise died some 18 months after her daughter was born. As she lay dying, in her last days, I went to see her. I distinctly remember holding her hand silently for quite a time and praying. And as I prayed, wordlessly, Louise said 'You're healing me'. I don't know exactly what happened – but somehow, by praying in the name of Jesus, by seeking to touch, to make contact with God, healing flowed to Louise. Note that Louise wasn't cured. Louise was dying and died soon after: but what she felt, what she experienced, was God's peace and healing.

The second occasion was more recently. Again someone had a life-threatening illness. Again I joined the person themselves and lots of other people in seeking to be in contact with Jesus and in commending this person to God's care: to cure if that be God's will – but asking for peace and fullness of life, whatever their eventual state of health. The outcome of this situation has been a gift of continuing life here on earth – a life with a quality that perhaps couldn't have been imagined in the darkest days of the illness. But God's transforming power has been experienced as the person concerned and others with them actively sought contact with God, to be in touch with God as revealed in and prayed to in the name of Jesus.

So – as we were invited last week, physically to open our hands on our laps, to embody our openness to God's Spirit, so I invite you, if you would like, to do the same again. In a few minutes, at the start of the Eucharistic Prayer, we shall say 'The Lord is here: his Spirit is with us'. But why wait to say it then? Let's act on that affirmation now. Let's spend a few moments in quiet, pro-actively seeking contact with God as both Jairus and the unnamed woman did in Mark 5. Let's take to him our desires for healing – as both people did in today's Gospel. The prayer for healing may be something for ourselves – or something for another person...those we love or those who are just friends or acquaintances. It doesn't matter how close we are to them: what matters is that we draw close – and draw other people in our prayers close to God too.

So: let's spend some moments now in silent prayer, actively seeking God and praying that we might continue to seek him in the days ahead, asking and trusting that we will experience God's transforming power – just as the two very different people, Jairus and the unnamed woman, did 2,000 years ago – and experienced wholeness and salvation.

**Lord Jesus Christ,
present with us now,
flood our bodies, minds and spirit – and those we pray for - with your grace;
take away all that harms and hinders your work in us,
and fill us with your healing and peace. Amen.**