

Faith and healing

Our gospel reading today began with the call of Matthew. It's only one verse, but it describes an incident that changed Matthew's life. There was Matthew, being a good collaborator with the Romans manning his tax collector's booth by the side of the road. He wouldn't have been much liked by the Jewish people, but he would have been doing pretty well for himself, living, no doubt, a comfortable life.

But Jesus came to him and said, "Follow me." And he did.

Then the narrative moves to Matthew hosting Jesus and the disciples, and many of Matthew's fellow tax collectors and other 'sinners'.

The Pharisees, of course, were not happy with this. "Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?" they asked the disciples. They weren't expecting an answer, of course, they were finding fault.

The disciples didn't answer, but Jesus did.

And we heard that Jesus said, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. But go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.' For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners."

The Pharisees, and the other religious authorities, held themselves in high esteem. They thought themselves righteous. They were God's representatives, and they worked to make sure all the right things were done – the festivals kept, the rituals observed, the sacrifices made.

Jesus told them that wasn't what was needed though. Jesus said, as we heard in our reading from Hosea "...I desire mercy, not sacrifice". Go and think about what that means, he said. The verse from Hosea adds "and acknowledgment of God rather than burnt offerings." Your sacrifices aren't enough. Your 'good behaviour' is not enough. You have to put God first.

It's easy to fall into the same trap today. To think that we're doing the right things, even when where not putting God first.

Jesus began his response to the Pharisees by saying, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick." And the second part of today's reading from Matthew's gospel gives two examples of the sick who need a doctor: A synagogue leader whose daughter had died went to Jesus confident that Jesus has the power to bring her back to life, and a woman who seems to 'steal' a miracle from Jesus.

We often jump to thinking that the Jewish leaders were opposed to Jesus, but not all were – we think particularly of Nicodemus, but this synagogue leader certainly puts his faith in Jesus.

Jesus and his disciples set off for the synagogue leader's house, but on the way there, he was interrupted. As we read through gospels, we mostly find self-contained stories – a miracle, a conversation, a journey, or a parable. But in today's reading, we have the accounts of two miracles intertwined. And not just in Matthew's gospel, but also in very similar forms in Mark (5:21-43) and Luke (8:40-55).

Looking through Matthew's gospel, we get an idea of where these intertwined stories occur in Jesus' ministry. Back in chapters three and four, he appeared in the wilderness and was baptised by John, was tempted by Satan in the wilderness, then began his ministry and called his first disciples. Jesus healed the sick and the demon possessed. Chapters five through seven are the sermon on the mount, and then in chapter eight have Jesus healing a man with leprosy, the centurion's paralysed daughter, Peter's mother-in-law and many others, as well as casting out demons. Jesus also showed his power by calming a storm on the lake.

We sometimes think of Jesus as a serene figure who passes through the gospels in an almost otherworldly way. But the reality was that he was in the midst of first century Judean life – with all its disease and suffering, and also with all its hustle and bustle. Jesus was healing people who were sick, he was helping those possessed by demons. It was really dramatic stuff. He was often surrounded by crowds, crowds who wanted to hear from him – but also crowds who wanted him to do specific things.

In his ministry, Jesus was often under pressure, and several times we read of Jesus withdrawing from the crowds to pray.

Again, in today's reading, we find Jesus surrounded by a crowd. In this crowd was a woman who was suffering – suffering physically, emotionally and spiritually. She had been subject to bleeding for twelve years. It would have been horrible for her. Even beyond whatever pain and weakness the bleeding caused, and whatever suffering the doctors had inflicted trying to heal her, there were the implications of this constant bleeding on her life.

I can tell you that the Leviticus chapter 15 doesn't come up often in church life, and I don't think it's an assigned lectionary reading, but it does spell out what the consequences of this woman's condition would have been - she will be unclean as long as she is bleeding... Any bed she lies on ... will be unclean, ... and anything she sits on will be unclean... (Leviticus 15:24-26) This woman, because of her illness, is unclean.

And not only is she unclean: anything she touches is made unclean. And anyone she touches is made unclean. And anyone who touches anything she touches is unclean too. And this had gone on for twelve years.

This woman was desperate. And she thought “If I only touch his cloak, I will be healed”. She was scared – she didn’t kneel down in front of Jesus and ask for help like the synagogue leader had done, instead she came up behind him, likely pushing her way through the crowd hoping that no one would notice her, and reaching out to touch Jesus’ cloak.

She was reaching out to Jesus. She had hope that Jesus could help her – but it was quite a superstitious hope: “If I only touch his cloak, I will be healed”. And so she reached out and touched his cloak.

Jesus realised what had happened, and turned around – and don’t forget he was on his way to synagogue leader’s daughter – and spoke to this woman: “Take heart, daughter,” he said, “your faith has healed you.” Jesus addressed her with kindness – he calls her “daughter”. Then he put aside her superstition – it wasn’t her touching the cloak that healed her – instead he told her “Your faith has healed you.” It was her faith – her belief in Jesus, her trust in Jesus – that healed her. Not some magical healing from simply touching Jesus’ robes.

Jesus, after this encounter with the woman, finally arrived at the synagogue leaders house... where the people were mourning. The crowd was wailing and crying – and people were playing pipes. This was the normal response to a death, to gather, to mourn openly and loudly.

But Jesus sent the mourners away, saying “Go away. The girl is not dead but asleep” And the mourners – as you might expect – laugh at Jesus. They knew she was dead - - they’d been with the girl, they knew how ill she had been; and they knew she had died. There was no way she was only asleep! They’d seen death before. So of course they laughed.

Jesus sent the crowd away, and then he went inside and took the girl by the hand... and she got up. And just like the healing of the woman, Jesus puts away superstition. He didn’t need or want a crowd of witnesses, instead he wanted to put things right – when someone came to him with a need, he responded. Just like the woman’s healing came as a result of her faith, her belief in Jesus, so the resurrection of the girl came as a result of the synagogue leader’s belief, his faith in Jesus.

The account that Matthew gives us of both these miracles points to the power of Jesus, but even more importantly to the power of faith in Jesus. “Your faith has healed you”. In both these miracles we see a complete reversal of what would be expected.

As Leviticus 15 teaches, a woman who was bleeding was unclean and anything – or anyone – she touched would also be made unclean. But when the woman reached out and touched the edge of Jesus’ cloak, instead of her uncleanness tainting Jesus, it was Jesus’ ‘cleanliness’ – his healing or his power – that flowed to the woman.

Dead bodies, of course, were also considered unclean – Numbers 19 tells us that “Whoever touches the dead body of anyone will be unclean for seven days.” (Numbers 19:11). But Jesus took the hand of the girl – which should by rights have made him unclean, but instead it was Jesus’ ‘cleanliness’ – his power, his healing, his life – that flowed to the girl.

Faith was not needed in all of Jesus’ miracles, but faith, hope and trust in him were there with these two. These were people who were sick, realised that, and sought a doctor. They didn’t hold themselves to be righteous, but sought help – they sought Jesus.

It’s easy to be like the Pharisees and think that we can look after ourselves. That we can do the right thing, and save ourselves from whatever problems confront us. Or to be like the Pharisees and do the right thing to earn God’s favour... And after all so many of the problems of our lives can be solved with money. Until they can’t.

We live in an age where it seems we don’t witness miracles... that’s not to say they don’t happen, but if they do, they are rare and far between. Back when Jesus was undertaking his ministry miracles were signs of Jesus power – pointers to the kingdom of heaven, pointers to who Jesus was and how things should be.

At the time of Jesus’ miracles, people hadn’t yet received the gift of the Holy Spirit - and at the time of the miracles we read of in Acts, the Holy Spirit was still spreading out across the world as the gospel was being preached. Before the Holy Spirit, miracles were the signs that pointed to Jesus as the Son of God.

Remember Jesus speaking to Thomas after showing him his wounded hands and side - proving to Thomas the truth of Jesus resurrection? Jesus said to Thomas, “Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed”. Those who have not seen and believed are blessed, not because their belief is better than Thomas’, but because their belief comes from the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. That’s how we come to know and accept all that God has done for us in Jesus today - not from witnessing miracles or seeing evidence of the resurrection, but because of the action of the Holy Spirit in our hearts.

I think Christians today sometimes miss that point. We can easily become preoccupied with relying on other evidence: People think that if they can *just* find archaeological evidence of Noah’s ark, or the tower of Babel or Sodom or Gomorrah, that people will be convinced of the truth, or if they can just somehow prove a seven day creation, then people will come to believe in Jesus. If we can just do this. Or just do that. Or just do the other thing. If we can just touch the edge of Jesus’ cloak, then we will be made well.

But it wasn’t about touching the edge of his cloak for the woman, was it? Jesus said plainly it was her faith that made her well. There were no magical properties to Jesus’ clothing. It was simply the woman’s faith - in Jesus - that made the difference. And so it

is with us. When we are like the woman and are worn down and worn out by life and the world or when we feel we are “unclean” or unworthy, we need to not be seeking magical cures or worldly solutions, but we need to be putting our faith in Jesus. Our faith. Our belief and our hope.

And when we are like the synagogue leader: When things are beyond our control. When things are desperate, when we are overwhelmed or when things seem hopeless. Then we can trust Jesus to be with us even through the darkest times of our lives. Don't fear: Have belief in Jesus. Have hope in Jesus. Have faith in Jesus.

When we are sick, we need a doctor.

If we are unrighteous, we need Jesus – Jesus who lived and died and rose again for all of us.

And as we turn to him in faith, we turn away from that unrighteousness, remembering always, that God desires mercy, not sacrifice.

Amen