

Sermon – Sunday 1st July 2018 – 9.30 am

A glance at my DVD collection will tell you that I am a great fan of romantic comedies. I'm not really going to justify this, because I do recognise that they're not exactly high brow viewing. But they generally make me laugh and leave me feeling better for watching them. I do have to acknowledge, though, that in terms of relationship advice they are a little lacking. If any of us approached marriage or any long term relationship assuming that life would be just like a romantic comedy, we would probably end up not only disappointed but potentially giving up on real relationships rather quickly. Because of course the romantic comedy shows us the falling in love part, but is rather quiet on the "what next" part. Part of the reason that they have the feel good factor is that something inside us assumes that they live happily ever after without really having to think about whether that's likely, and indeed what that means.

Often when I am preparing couples for marriage, I will ask them about their love story – how and where they met; what brought them together; what it is that they love about one another. From what I've just told you, you will realise that part of the reason I do this is because I am a sucker for a good love story. But there is another reason, too. There is something about those stories that are part of the foundation of a relationship. They are stories that we might return to at times and that we tend to draw on when things feel more difficult. I like to encourage couples to remember how it is that they deal with disagreement when they are in the first flush of love, because those are helpful things to remember down the line, with more water under the bridge, when feelings might be more complicated.

And it's not just the stories from the beginning of a relationship that are foundational. There may be a special holiday, anniversary, or perhaps just a moment – stories that are recalled as part of what holds you together.

When I was reading this morning's gospel reading, I was reminded that what is true of relationships can also be true of our faith. There can be foundational stories that we need to keep on telling. That hold us through the good times and the bad. The two stories from the gospel reading are undoubtedly two such stories. First, the story of Jairus. While we may be under the impression that the Jewish religious leaders were all opposed to Jesus, this story assures us that that can't be true. Jairus was one of the leaders of the synagogue, and when his daughter was ill, he knew exactly where he was going to turn.

There is urgency to both of these stories. Can you imagine quite how surprising it would be to see someone who commanded respect falling to his knees in front of Jesus and begging? A sign of desperation, perhaps, but also of profound faith. Jairus believed that when his daughter was close to death, the person he needed to approach was Jesus.

We know nothing of Jairus's reaction when Jesus is interrupted, but it adds to our own sense of anticipation. We are right there with Jairus, feeling his anguish, and suddenly Jesus is distracted. In the middle of the large crowd, he realises that he has been touched by someone and power has gone out of him. He turns to find out who it was – a woman who has been suffering from haemorrhages, suddenly healed by his touch. By the time that we return to the first story, the news is that Jairus's daughter has died. Jesus refuses to accept that, and by the end, she is fit and well and in need of a meal.

In Mark's gospel, when one story is sandwiched inside another, they are meant to interpret one another. There are signs of this in the narrative. Do you notice how Jairus's daughter is 12 years old, and the woman has been suffering for 12 years? And the way in which Jairus's daughter is brought back to life in order that she can become a woman (12 was the age many girls married), and once the woman is healed, Jesus refers to her as a daughter? These subtle resonances remind us that there is a shared thread in these stories, and that thread is faith.

Indeed, the story of the woman suffering from haemorrhages is another story of profound faith. Socially unclean, and probably at the end of her tether after suffering for so long, the woman makes a bold and daring move. Again, she may have been desperate – she had certainly tried many avenues for treatment – but she also believed that Jesus could make a difference. And so, in the middle of a crowd, she touched the hem of his cloak. And then, when he asked who had done so, knowing that she had been healed, she came forward.

As I was reading and re-reading these two stories, I initially began to wonder what happened next. How do either of these stories continue? What do Jairus's daughter and the woman do after they have been returned to life and health?

But it occurred to me that the reason Mark tells these stories is because it isn't what happens next that is important. Indeed, we can all imagine possible scenarios for what happened next. The ways – big and small – in which God continued to touch the lives of these two women and Jairus, and touch the lives of others through them.

What matters here is that we have two foundational stories of faith. Stories that would be told time and time again – first by those involved, then by those who heard about what happened, and now by us as part of the foundation of our own faith. And what these stories reminded me of most of all was the importance for each of us to continue to remember our own faith stories. They may not be quite as dramatic as the ones in this morning's reading, but they are no less significant. Each one of us has stories – big and small – of significant "God" moments. For some it may be that sense of wanting to get married in church which you may not even be able to articulate very clearly, but nevertheless seems to matter. Or it might be that tentative sense of there being something more to life, something that reaches above and beyond our daily concerns – and yet cares about us in those concerns.

But many of you will be able to identify times that cemented your faith. Particular moments when God felt close; when you felt God guiding you. For some of you moments of conversion.

And today I want us all to remember just how important those stories are. To take time to recollect them – to remember that sense of being enlivened. Of knowing God's presence. Of feeling it transform us. And of wanting to share that knowledge with others.

Just like in relationships, there can be times when we lose sight of what brought us to faith in the first place. When the excitement and passion dull somewhat. But at the heart of our faith is a God who knows us, loves us, and longs for that love to be shared. Let's keep remembering those stories that have brought us to our knees before God so that we too are revived and long to share God's love with others.

Amen