

Collect, Readings and Sermon for Sunday 27th June 2021
The Fourth Sunday after Trinity

Collect

Faithful Creator,
whose mercy never fails:
deepen our faithfulness to you
and to your living Word,
Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen.

Lamentations 3:22-33

The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases,
his mercies never come to an end;
they are new every morning;
great is your faithfulness.
'The Lord is my portion,' says my soul,
'therefore I will hope in him.'

The Lord is good to those who wait for him,
to the soul that seeks him.
It is good that one should wait quietly
for the salvation of the Lord.
It is good for one to bear
the yoke in youth,
to sit alone in silence
when the Lord has imposed it,
to put one's mouth to the dust
(there may yet be hope),
to give one's cheek to the smiter,
and be filled with insults.

For the Lord will not
reject for ever.
Although he causes grief, he will have compassion
according to the abundance of his steadfast love;
for he does not willingly afflict
or grieve anyone.

Mark 5:21-end

When Jesus had crossed again in the boat to the other side, a great crowd gathered round him; and he was by the lake. Then one of the leaders of the synagogue named Jairus came and, when he saw him, fell at his feet and begged him repeatedly, 'My little daughter is at the point of death. Come and lay your hands on her, so that she may be made well, and live.' So he went with him.

And a large crowd followed him and pressed in on him. Now there was a woman who had been suffering from haemorrhages for twelve years. She had endured much under many physicians, and had spent all that she had; and she was no better, but rather grew worse. She had heard about Jesus, and came up behind him in the crowd and touched his cloak, for she said, 'If I but touch his clothes, I will be made well.' Immediately her haemorrhage stopped; and she felt in her body that she was healed of her disease. Immediately aware that power had gone forth from him, Jesus turned about in the crowd and said, 'Who touched my clothes?' And his disciples said to him, 'You see the crowd pressing in on you; how can you say, "Who touched me?" ' He looked all round to see who had done it. But the woman, knowing what had happened to her, came in fear and trembling, fell down before him, and told him the whole truth. He said to her, 'Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace, and be healed of your disease.'

While he was still speaking, some people came from the leader's house to say, 'Your daughter is dead. Why trouble the teacher any further?' But overhearing what they said, Jesus said to the leader of the synagogue, 'Do not fear, only believe.' He allowed no one to follow him except Peter, James, and John, the brother of James. When they came to the house of the leader of the synagogue, he saw a commotion, people weeping and wailing loudly. When he had entered, he said to them, 'Why do you make a commotion and weep? The child is not dead but sleeping.' And they laughed at him. Then he put them all outside, and took the child's father and mother and those who were with him, and went in where the child was. He took her by the hand and said to her, 'Talitha cum', which means, 'Little girl, get up!' And immediately the girl got up and began to walk about (she was twelve years of age). At this they were overcome with amazement. He strictly ordered them that no one should know this, and told them to give her something to eat.

Sermon

Before I went to theological college, I attended some modules of the Guildford Local Ministry Programme. At the time I was attending, the Old Testament course was led by Gareth Lloyd-Jones who was based at Bangor University. What I remember the most about his sessions was his utter command of the books of the Old Testament. It was like he lived and breathed them.

I don't know about you, but there are times when I find myself listening to a reading on Sunday and feeling completely lost. I can't quite work out what I am supposed to be getting from it. I've had the same feeling on the occasions when I have sat down and tried to read the Bible from start to finish. Somehow I get bogged down in the details. I can't see the wood for the trees.

Which is why Gareth Lloyd-Jones was so extraordinary. As he spoke about Moses, he would tell his story in a way that we could all understand. He would show us the patterns that appear and reappear in the 40 chapters of Exodus. He pointed out things that made us laugh. And most importantly, by bringing the story to life, he showed us how and why it still matters to us today.

I was reminded of those sessions with Gareth Lloyd Jones when I picked up a book by Rob Bell the other day. It's called "What is the Bible?" and rather helpfully has the subtitle, "how an ancient library of poems, letters, and stories can transform the way you think and feel about everything." It's quite a claim, and I wonder whether it's the way most of us feel when we pick up our Bibles.

The opening chapter is, rather enigmatically, entitled "Moses and His Moisture." In it, Bell takes as his starting point a single verse from Deuteronomy 34 at the death of Moses: "Moses was one hundred and twenty years old when he died; his sight was unimpaired and his vigour had not abated." He uses this single verse to begin to make sense of some of the major themes of the Old Testament – and indeed the Bible as a whole.

Why, he asks, did the writer want us to know that, even at his death, Moses could see and, to put it bluntly, was virile? This is what Bell says: "To answer that question, you have to go back, much earlier in the history of Moses's people, to a man named Abraham." In a few short paragraphs, Bell explains that Abraham, by leaving his father's household and setting out on a journey to a new land, broke with a worldview that saw people as born into a cycle of events which endlessly repeats itself. He showed that we don't have to repeat everything that has already happened.

Here's Bell again: "The storyteller wants you the reader to know that Abraham has a destiny to fulfil in which he becomes the father of a new kind of people to usher in a new era for humanity – one based in love, not violence. As Abraham is told ... *all peoples on earth will be blessed through you*. This was a new idea. They won't conquer other people but bless them."

And in order to form a new kind of people to take the world in a new direction, it's important to have children. Hence the need to emphasise Moses's virility. Even at his death.

Just as Gareth Lloyd Jones helped us as students to understand the relevance of the Old Testament to us today, so does this book. From the starting point of seemingly innocuous verses, Bell identifies key themes: "Can the world head in a new direction, or are we trapped, doomed to repeat that same old, tired cycle of conflict?" "Are our lives set in stone and unable to change, or can we be set free from whatever it is that enslaves us?"

These big themes, which we can see in the Old Testament, continue to be played out in the life of Jesus. Think now of the gospel reading that we have just heard, and especially the woman who has been living with haemorrhages for twelve long years. And then listen to that theme once again: “Are our lives set in stone and unable to change, or can we be set free from whatever it is that enslaves us?”

Mark’s gospel is the shortest of the gospels. Every story has to count because Mark has good news to tell us, and he means to make sure that we are left in no doubt. This means that every story he tells has to help his readers to understand what that good news is. So, when we hear this morning’s gospel reading – the stories of the young girl who is ill, dies and is healed, set alongside the story of the woman with haemorrhages – we need to look for every bit of meaning. We are free to understand that they can work on a number of levels to reveal the good news. And, for those of you who were paying attention a few weeks ago, this is another Markan sandwich, with the story of the young girl wrapped around the central story, so the two stories help to interpret one another.

On one level there is a story of interruption. I remember an occasion at university when I was due to meet with a friend who was having a bit of a tough time and wanted to talk about it. Only just as I was about to leave the house, another friend dropped a plate of food in the kitchen, which was the final straw in what had been a very bad day. Leaving me with what felt like an impossible choice. Should I leave one friend who was clearly upset in order to meet the other as planned? Or do I leave someone who has asked for help to think I don’t care? And this was in the days before mobile phones – not that I think that would have made the decision any easier.

In some ways my situation was not unlike that of Jesus in the gospel reading – heading somewhere important as requested, yet interrupted by a pressing need. It’s not that the story provides an answer to my predicament, but it is a reminder that God understands our human situations. And it also draws us back to the fundamental point that healing comes from God, so that is where we need to place our faith, rather than being defeated by our own weakness.

Yet there are other levels to these stories, too. If we consider those big themes identified by Rob Bell, we have another perspective. Here, set alongside one another, we have a story of a woman whose life is completely transformed through healing; and a girl who is brought to new life. The gospel writer wanted readers to understand that Jesus was all about transforming our lives. When I studied counselling, one of the things that we would often discuss is how often when people come for counselling, they know that there are things in their lives that make them unhappy, yet they feel powerless to change them. For most of us, it is easier to keep on doing what we have always done, even if it isn’t really fulfilling, than to change it. And the message of Jesus is that we can be set free from that way of thinking. Instead of being afraid of change; fearful that we won’t cope with its consequences; we – like the woman with haemorrhages – are invited to be healed. To feel the burden of the past lifted, freeing us to make changes.

And if we think of the twelve year old girl, it is not that she had somehow become immortal, but that through her, Jesus could reveal God’s purposes – to bring us all to new life. A new life that begins here on earth, and is fulfilled in all eternity.

Which brings us back to a realisation that those big questions that Rob Bell identified in the Old Testament are carried into the New Testament through Jesus and are questions for all of us: “Can

the world head in a new direction, or are we trapped, doomed to repeat that same old, tired cycle of conflict?" "Is *your* life set in stone and unable to change, or can *you* be set free from whatever it is that enslaves you?"

Amen