

1 July 2018

**Faith**

(Mark 5.21-43)

When I was a student at the University of St Andrews, I used frequently walked past – and even occasionally entered – the modest doorway of the local Gospel Hall. On a glass-covered notice-board next to the door, there would usually be a poster presenting, in large and imposing but dull-coloured letters, a Biblical text, always from the Authorised or “King James” version. One such, I recall, sternly challenged passers-by with the question from Matthew 22.42,

WHAT THINK YE OF CHRIST?

As Divinity students, we used to respond rather irreverently to these simple, unadorned quotations, with answers such as, “Bit of a party animal!” (thinking of the wine Jesus supplied at the wedding in Cana in John 2.1-12,) of “Hangs out with the wrong crowd!” (thinking of the accusation, “Friend of sinners” levelled at Jesus’ in Matthew 11.19 and Luke 7.34. I don’t think these responses were exactly what the good people of the Gospel Hall had in mind when they put up their poster; but, on reflection, I suppose they were perhaps comforting ways for students to think of Jesus, having a tendency to be party animals ourselves and no doubt also, in our juvenile way, sinners.

St Mark’s Gospel records a wide variety of responses to Jesus:

in chapter 1, verse 27, his hearers recognise something new about his teaching

in chapter 2, verse 7, he is accused by the Pharisees of blasphemy

in chapter 2, verse 16, he is criticised for the company he keeps

and in chapter three, verse 21, he is simply dismissed as crazy.

In this morning’s gospel reading, however, we encounter the first instance in which Jesus is met with flat-out disbelief, laughed at (Mark 5.40) for his faith in the healing power of God.

Let’s rewind a bit and look at the story as a whole.

The stories of Jairus and of the woman with a haemorrhage are found in all three of the Synoptic gospels, Matthew, Mark and Luke. Unusually, however, Mark, the shortest gospel, has longest version of these stories.

Mark’s earlier healing stories are brief, business-like, almost terse; but here there is more in the way of context and set-up. In all three versions, the two healing stories are intertwined, as indeed they are in Matthew and Luke, too. Mark presents the first part of the story of Jairus,

identified by Mark as a “leader of the synagogue,” interrupts it with the whole story of the unnamed woman with a haemorrhage, and then presents the second part of the Jairus story. Importantly, Jairus’ request for healing is made not on his own behalf (cf. 1.40-45), but on behalf of someone else, albeit someone intimately related to him. Just after Jairus makes his request, however, a woman who knows Jesus only by reputation is introduced, but she doesn’t even ask to be healed, only touches his cloak and is made whole again. Then comes the news that the woman’s interruption has wasted crucial moments. Jesus is too late. Jairus’ daughter has died. I’m going to pause at this point in the story, because there’s something very important about faith going on here. First, the actions of the unclean woman are borne of utter desperation. She’s not like someone manoeuvring into a position where she can make eye contact or shake hands with a celebrity; on the contrary, she doesn’t care whether Jesus even notices her; she just wants to touch the edge of his robe. But these actions are interpreted by Jesus as being borne, not of desperation but of faith. He is determined to find out who she is, to acknowledge her as an individual human being and a child of God:

“Daughter,” he says, when she is identified to him, “your faith has made you well; go in peace, and be healed of your disease” (Mark 5.34).

Although this unnamed woman has made no verbal profession of faith, Jesus himself has declared her faithful.

So here’s a question: Why does the Church so often insist on a statement in words, when for Jesus it’s so often actions that really count?

And Mark isn’t done with faith yet. At the point where he picks up the Jairus story again, the news is brought that Jesus is too late. Jairus’ daughter has died. Overhearing this, however, Jesus says to Jairus, very simply,

"Do not fear, only believe" (Mark 5.36).

His words to the woman were descriptive, bringing out the underlying meaning of something that had just happened: “Your faith has made you well.” His words to Jairus are prescriptive, almost gently imperative, about the importance of faith to something that is about to happen: "Do not fear, only believe."

And so we come to the first instance of sheer disbelief, cynicism and mockery in response to the presence and words of Jesus. When he tells the crowd gathered at Jairus’ house that his daughter is not dead, but sleeping, they laughed at him. But their laughter – contrasting with the desperate faith of the woman whom we have just heard about, and the urging to faith by Jesus of Jairus who is hoping against hope – serves only to heighten the tension of the story. Jesus takes the girl’s hand, bids her rise up, and she does so; and suddenly the disbelieving laughter of the crowds turns into *megale ekstaseis*, the literal translation of the Greek is “great ecstasy.”

The kingdom of God comes near to all these people in the presence of Jesus. The presence of Jesus is what transforms the lives of everyone.

In Mark's gospel, Jesus is proclaimed both his deeds and his teaching, and by the book's many and various characters; and the proclamation is that the promise of God has come to pass, made real and present and immediate in Jesus.

We may recognise that in this proclamation there is something new and worth investigating further.

We may, on the other hand, hear only blasphemy, in the sense of something that challenges the beliefs we cling to, in our fear and insecurity.

We may not like the company the proclamation requires us to keep, preferring to stay with children of God who are like us, rather than children of God who are hungry and thirsty, sick or injured, seeking asylum, fleeing abuse, experiencing addiction, sleeping rough or working the streets at night.

We may think that the proclamation is crazy, that it's one thing for Jesus to live like that, but quite another to expect us to do so.

Or we may decide to stop seeking salvation in the material possessions and false values that surround us, to try to find our way through all the crowd and noise of 21st century life, and focus all our efforts on just touching the edge of Jesus' robe; and, having touched him, we may take to ourselves his words to the woman in today's gospel: "Your faith has made you well."

We are about to take the bread and wine of communion: a simple action in itself, but one in which we make again the enormous commitment of really being the Body of Christ in the world today.

I am not the host at this sacred meal. It is not I who invite you. This is not my table or your table. Jesus Christ is the host. It is Jesus Christ who invites you. This is his table. Receive these gifts of bread and wine, set aside and sanctified for His purposes. We eat and drink, not because we feel worthy, but because Jesus Christ commands us. Having obeyed his great command, we may then take to ourselves his words to Jairus in today's gospel: "Do not fear, only believe."

And so I leave you with these two assurances, which come not from me but from Jesus Christ himself:

When you think about this wonderful, amazing Church of St Andrew, this wonderful, amazing neighbourhood of Broomhall, this wonderful, amazing city of Sheffield, and all that you and I have experienced together, remember the words of Jesus Christ: "Your faith has made you well."

And when you think about this wonderful, amazing Church of St Andrew, this wonderful, amazing neighbourhood of Broomhall, this wonderful, amazing city of Sheffield, our present plans and our exciting future, remember the words of Jesus Christ: "Do not fear, only believe."

Revd Robert Beard B.D.