

Sermon for Sunday 11 June 2023 – The First Sunday after Trinity

Pete Postle, Reader

Hosea 5.15–6.6; Psalm 50.7-15; Romans 4.13-25; Matthew 9.9-13,18-26

May all I think and say be always acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer. Amen. I'd ask you to sit, but you are. In that last reading, Jesus is in Capernaum and we heard about the recruitment, if I may be permitted such a term, of Matthew to the twelve apostles. Matthew was a tax collector.

Now that is a sinner by definition to the Jewish people, because he collected taxes for the Roman government rather than giving it to the temple or the synagogue. The Orthodox were forbidden to give or receive anything from them, or to entertain or be entertained by them. Leviticus 20 provides a definition of such sinners, calling them worshippers of Molech, who is probably a pagan Canaanite God.

I always associate Matthew with Harold, who had been the 'man from the Pru' down in my part of Devon, collecting weekly subscriptions for his secular insurance employer. But when I knew him, he was and had always been a devout Christian. He loved to be asked to read one of the lessons, particularly if it was from Isaiah. But his introductions, erudite and interesting, could sometimes be as long as the sermon. Meanwhile his Ruth would play the organ and put her ten pound fee back in the collection plate. She used to suck throat sweets, and occasionally a sticky one would interfere with her playing by landing on a key or two.

Now I'm going to jump around that last reading of that Gospel reading - you might need your pewsheet with you. We have two miracles in one gospel reading, one tucked within the other, but with a common message. Jairus's daughter - Jairus is a leader of the synagogue; an administrative head that is; so he did not help officiate at services, but allocated duties and ensured proper conduct. In short, he was a churchwarden, or should we say a synagogue-warden. He was therefore a member of that part of the Jewish hierarchy who most took exception to Matthew's profession. Despite his prejudices, though, Jairus is evidently completely convinced by what he has heard of Jesus's healing powers.

And so it is to Jesus. He first turns when his daughter falls critically ill. His household are not so impressed and tell him not to bother the teacher, rabbi, any further. His daughter is already dead and they laugh at Jesus. But Jesus says to Jairus, 'Do not fear, only believe. Hold on to your faith.' The little girl is about twelve years old. According to Jewish custom, she would become a woman when she would one day pass her 12th birthday and become betrothed to her future husband. So at her funeral, if it happened, there would also have been a poignant little form of marriage service, a double tragedy for her parents.

But and so to the resurrection; it was just that, but a resurrection, of course, back into this mortal life of ours. Jesus goes into the child's home, holds her hand and says in Aramaic in Mark's gospel, 'Talitha cumi.' - 'Come, little girl, get up'. Jesus then, speaking in his native tongue - a lovely thought -

interwoven into this story, we have that of the haemorrhaging woman, twelve years, coincidentally, of suffering, she has endured; and spent all her savings seeking medical help. She has endured much under many physicians, comments Mark; oh dear! Small wonder in the Mishnah, writings of Jewish spiritual leaders, part of the Talmud we read, rabbi Judah says 'Mule drivers are most of them wicked; camel drivers are mostly proper folk; sailors are most of them saintly; the best among physicians is destined for cahenna; and the best among butchers is an ally of the Amalekites . cahenna. Well, there's a nice bit of stereotyping for you! I think Ecclesiastes in our Bibles, in the Apocrypha, has a better and more generous view of the medical profession, and one that entirely equates to my experiences with the NHS - honour physicians for their services, for the Lord created them; their gift of healing comes from on high. There may come a time when recovery lies in the hands of the physicians, for they too pray to the Lord that he grants them success in diagnosis and in healing for the sake of preserving life.

But this poor woman lives in the first century AD. There's no such sophisticated medical help for her. But she has faith, simple, unquestioning faith. She knows she only has to touch the hem of Jesus's garment to be made better. And so it is, daughter, your faith has made you well. Go in peace and be healed of your disease.

So these two miracles are a clear recording of Jesus's supernatural, meaning infinitely more than natural, powers. They are recorded, these two stories, in all three of the Synoptic Gospels. Indeed, Jesus goes on to teach his skills of his to his disciples, and they pass them on to others. It is my belief that possession of such effective powers played a large part in the rapid spread of the early church, being, as they were, a very potent demonstration of the power and reality of faith. Unhappily, somewhere fairly early along the historical line, the teaching of a skill fades almost out of sight, perhaps in parallel with the loss of a simple, unquestioning faith in those who would be healed, who dare say, do not fear, only believe.

And finally, having gone from front to back, I turn back to the middle of the Gospel reading Jesus quotes from Hosea; you've got it there on your sheet. Hosea says, you remember, for I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice. Whereas Matthew in your Gospel reading, says, I desire mercy and not sacrifice. But never fear. the Hebrew words used are have entirely parallel meanings. In other versions of the Bible you'll find them variously translated, but with a common theme of goodness and loyalty. Loyalty to God, of course, as though Hosea makes it perfectly clear if you read that whole verse in front of you. For I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings.

So we don't have to beat about the bush anymore. What Jesus wants from us is mercy, kindness, goodness, the steadfast love of God. We can, he implies, keep our burnt offerings, our sacrifices and any such associated ceremony that goes with them. They may make us feel good, they may help us to feel nearer to God, but what God really wants from us is in our hearts, laid open to receive him. Jesus's message, then, has meaning for both orthodox believers such as the Pharisees and those they would term sinners. For the sinners, the message is simple and transparent - if you are a sinner and know that you sin, you also know that you need to be saved from that sin, just as the sick needs a physician, says Jesus. But a rather more intriguing question for me is who are the righteous for whom he speaks? Can the Pharisees, for example, those careful followers of the righteous of the Law, classify themselves in that

elite group? Can we, as regular churchgoers, the orthodox of our time, equally have the temerity to suggest that our weekly devotions put us among the righteous?

Pharisees, in reality, aren't a bad lot. We aren't a bad lot. They are trying to be good. We are trying to be good. They are trying to follow God's way. They approach and listen to God's, Jesus's, words. It's just sometimes they and we can't see the wood, God's love, grace and mercy, for the trees; their self imposed microscopic adherence to the law of Moses. We must make sure we recognise where they went wrong and don't make the same mistake.

This gospel reading, then, is all about faith. If you are ever anywhere near Preston St Mary the Virgin Church, above the arch, you will read these words, from the letter of James: 'be ye doers of the good, and not merely hearers.' And James actually goes on, ;who deceive themselves and doers who act, they will be blessed in their doing.' Amen.