

Mourning, Generosity and Faith

Somewhere in my parental home, my mother has squirrelled away all my school reports. On the whole, they're a fair portrayal of an eccentric child, though I do question their accuracy in a few places: like the PE teacher who celebrates that 'Paul is showing great promise in gymnastics'. I can't remember ever having tried gymnastics. I'm as wooden as can be and would likely snap. But I do sense I've had quite a bit of practice over the years in doing other sorts of gymnastics - not least of the theological type. Sometimes, when I read the three texts appointed as our Sunday readings, I marvel at the flexibility that is essential to get from one to another.

We have three very different readings today, with no obvious connections between them, but I do feel that each one speaks powerfully into the current context.

We begin in a place of lament and mourning in the opening chapter of 2 Samuel. A messenger runs to David to tell him the terrible news that Saul and Jonathan have died in battle. The young man explains how he was watching the battle and Saul turned to him and asked that he kill him. He admits to killing Saul, taking his crown and armlet and has come to present them to David. This is, of course, at variance to the end of 1 Samuel which tells that Saul killed himself by falling on his sword. Nevertheless, the news of their death is shocking to David who 'took hold of his clothes and tore them, and so did all the men who were with him'. It's fascinating to reflect upon this grief. The onlooker might be forgiven for thinking 'what's this about'? He won't have to deal with a crazy, power hungry king chasing him anymore? How many times have I sat alongside the mourners of someone I knew to be a rogue and listened to those words 'he wouldn't harm a fly!'. Grief distorts our vision - but in a way which enables us to express the value of what we have lost and, therefore, the pain of it too. I'm intensely aware of this having lost my Mum in the last few weeks. She did drive me up the wall at times, but the sense of loss is quite overwhelming. I'm also intensely aware of the bigger sense of loss in the church and community at the moment: both physically, as so many people are still coming to terms with the loss of loved ones over the past year, and metaphorically, as we leave behind a pre-pandemic world which was far from perfect yet had a familiarity to it. David couldn't start a new chapter in his life until he had mourned the loss of the old one. This strikes me as not just spiritual but emotional intelligence? I wonder whether we need to think a bit about this as a church. How do we help ourselves and our communities to 'tear our clothes' and process grief. It's something which Surrey County Council is giving some thought to, as is the nation. I sense it might be worth us considering too. It doesn't have to be big or expensive or time consuming but it's a need for so many at this time.

We then hear a passage from 2 Corinthians 8 about generosity. One of the wonderful things about Paul's theology is that it isn't worked out in the dry, smoke-filled rooms of academia, but in the struggles of embryonic Christian communities: often with similar issues to the ones that face us. Here, there's a problem with money. I've had enough of those struggles in the past year too. Being alongside parishes that have taken a nose dive in income through the hardships of members of the community, or the inability to be able to let premises. And trying to help manage this at a diocesan level - where there's an expectation that we distribute the beans in the same way but with fewer beans to distribute. Of course, money in this context is representative: it's representative of resources, and our approach to those resources. The key in all of this, says Paul, is generosity. But note what the generosity looks like. Paul talks about an equality of generosity: that people shouldn't give so much as to make themselves depleted of resources. I wonder whether there's a strong message there for us? Like so many other professions, I recognise that so many of our clergy, administrators, youth workers, ops managers, churchwardens, are exceptionally tired at present. There's an exhortation here to show some generosity to yourselves. Please, please ensure that you take time out this summer to redress this balance. We need to model healthy generosity to our church communities and parishes. Without having received ourselves, we are unable to be the dispensers of God's grace that Paul encourages us to be.

And then the Gospel speaks of fear and faith. In one of the great Markan sandwiches, we have one story inside another: the story of the raising of Jairus' daughter, wrapped around the story of the woman with the chronic bleeding. Jairus' daughter, 12 years old, is on the point of death and the unnamed woman, who seems considerably older, has been bleeding for 12 years.

I've been at the bedside of a 12 year old girl who was dying. For anyone whose been through such a trauma, you never forget it. It will always leave a scar. I can remember praying quietly to myself those words 'talitha koum' 'little girl get up' and, no matter how hard I prayed, it didn't work. I felt like I wanted to find their family Bible and rip out this page of Mark's gospel. I've also buried a young woman who bled to death, in the isolation of her flat. In her case, it was the culmination of a long illness where it felt like the life blood was being drained from her, as her energy, joy and motivation to be able to do anything, gradually slipped away.

There's a danger, I think, that we see these narratives on face value as just miraculous healings - which is, of course, what they are: but there is much deeper stuff going on. For me, this story is about a journey from fear to faith. It's beset with risk. The risk that the Jairus took, as an official of the local synagogue in reaching out to someone who wasn't the most popular amongst the Jewish officials and hierarchy. Jairus was presumably aware that this could all go horribly wrong and he could draw attention to himself for all the wrong reasons. A comms nightmare. Likewise, the risk that the woman with the haemorrhage took in getting herself to Jesus through the crowds in such poor health but also in her perpetual uncleanness - of being found out. And then there's the risk that Jesus himself took. Massive risk. The risk of association with a corpse or with blood: a public contravention of laws that are at the heart of Jewish faith and tradition.

The real healing that Jesus offers in these two stories is not restoration of physical life or termination of haemorrhage. It's helping those present to cross the chasm from fear to faith. There's a lot of fear around at present. The world is full of it. And there's ample within the life of the church too: all the way from loss of the church that we once knew, to finances, to sickness, to navigating the ever-changing health and safety policies, to wondering how we continue to serve a physical and virtual church, as well as keeping on top of the demands from every direction that are totally unrealistic on most of us. How do we leave these fears behind and grow in faith?

Every morning when I eat my breakfast, I say good morning to Soapy Sam. He's my most distinguished predecessor - in post between 1839 and 1845. His little portrait, taken from the time when he was Archdeacon of Surrey, has been passed down the line of archdeacons since. I'd made Samuel Wilberforce's acquaintance over breakfast before. Third son of the famous William Wilberforce, when he went on to be Bishop of Oxford, he opened the college where I trained. From a rather larger portrait in the college dining room, he peered down at me every morning as I was eating my cornflakes then. As I sat down to write my archdeacon's charge for the visitation this year, I looked up at Soapy Sam and asked him what he might have been saying to his churchwardens. Remarkably, I found a charge that he delivered in November 1842. Listen to this:

'What may be before us God knows; but this much is certain: with us, of His goodness, are still those healing powers, and that forecasting instinct, which alone can save people from civil and social misery. Let it be our part, faithfully and earnestly in our own sphere, to bring them to bear upon society around us. Let us believe in the true life of that heavenly system of which we are the ministers; let us act as those to whom is indeed committed a 'dispensation of the grace of God'; not going back to dead forms of bygone times, as if they were the life which, it may be, did once act through them, nor striving to force all things into channels through which in their season they have flowed, and which they now have left; but believing in the reality of the spiritual powers with which we are armed; believing in the true presence of Christ with us, and therefore bending all our strength, not to revive old customs but to quicken spiritual life within our Church and nation'.

Lament, generosity, and faith. I wonder whether these words that bubble up from our readings today are prophetic. I encourage you this week to consider what you might lament as we tentatively emerge from pandemic; how you might be generous to yourself as well as others in these months ahead; how you might feel the fear of loss yet risk reaching out towards those healing powers which come only from Jesus and not only build our faith but enable us to be dispensers of grace to the world: *transforming church and transforming lives* to the glory of God the Father, after the example of God the Son, and in the power of God the Holy Spirit. Amen.