

God's Gift to Women

Sermon for the Fifth Sunday after Pentecost, Year B, 27 June 2021

St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor ACT Australia

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Lamentations 3: 22-33; Psalm 30; 1-12; 2 Corinthians 8: 7-15; Mark 5: 21-43

+In the Name of the Father & of the Son & of the Holy Spirit. AMEN.

The American Episcopalians once commissioned a print advertising campaign that presented Christianity and its Anglican expression in a fresh and edgy light. Each advert had a particular target group in mind. One, obviously aimed at women on the lookout for male company, featured a picture of Jesus with the caption "You can't meet God's gift to women in a singles' bar."

Thus inspired, I'm suggesting that today's gospel also presents Jesus as God's gift to women. Why? Because the woman with the twelve-year-long haemorrhage, and the twelve-year-old girl who died on the cusp of sexual maturity, are restored by Jesus, not just to life and health but also to

the possibility of having someone to be with and share physical intimacy with.

The woman with the chronic haemorrhage was ritually unclean, and hence it's notable that she reaches out to Jesus and touches his clothing. This uncleanness doesn't put Jesus off, however—he's the first to claim this estranged woman back into the nexus of human togetherness: he calls her "Daughter," opening the way back for her to a way of life that had long been off limits. Marriage, sexual relationship and children—the great Biblical blessings of life for a Jewish woman—are now open to her.

And then the number twelve reappears with the story of Jesus and that young girl. She was twelve years old, which is marriageable age, as was the case in many traditional societies. Indeed, with parental permission a girl in Tasmania could still be legally married at the age of 12 up until 1948. Note that Jesus takes the dead girl by her hand, so that again a boundary of ritual uncleanness is crossed. Her return to life is also a return to the world of relationships. Like the

haemorrhaging woman, she can marry, be with a man and have children.

So, these aren't just generic healing miracles. They're subtly explicit commentary on the deep nature of Jesus' healings, which always bring an end to exclusion and restore people to relationship. In this case, there are overtones of sexuality in the healed lives granted to this woman, to this girl.

Now of course we know today that a woman's salvation doesn't depend on her having a man—nor her fulfillment, necessarily or, sadly, even her safety. And of course, we now appreciate the necessary psychological development of children and adolescents and their wider human rights. Hence the marriage of pubescent girls has been near-universally forbidden, and rightly so. But, while recognising that today's Gospel passage is likely freighted with some bygone cultural values, nevertheless we can still appreciate Jesus' urgent action to welcome, to relate, to touch, and to liberate two women who are cut off from the fulness of life in relationship. The Old Testament's constant attention to

marriage, family, ancestors and progeny is taken up here by Jesus, just as he does in another gospel when he deluges some eschatological blessings on the wedding at Cana.

And speaking of the Old Testament, we notice how today's lectionary passages from Lamentations and Psalm 30 set the scene for our Gospel. They extoll God's eagerness to deliver us from evil, to overcome oppressive forces that rob us of life. But this comes with a very frank acknowledgement of life's real difficulties, and that patient hopefulness will be necessary because there's no easy way out. What strikes me reading this Lamentations passage is that these setbacks mustn't be met with grievance or bitter resentment, because they're not absolute—because “the steadfast love of the Lord” is what's abundant, displacing our hurts and disappointments. This is worth remembering in our age of weaponised grievance, identity politics and cancel culture, where hurt people end up entrenching themselves in a whole world of hurt. That leaves no room for the prodigal joy of today's Psalmist, who declares to God that “You have turned

my mourning into dancing; you have taken off my sackcloth and clothed me with joy”.

We see all this being played out in today’s Gospel. The burdens are real, but they aren’t permanent, they aren’t absolute, and they’re being dealt with. Their acknowledgement is in the context of their overcoming. Jesus—God’s gift to women—comes to lift those burdens, not solidify them, and today we see him doing just that as a woman and a girl are drawn back to the centre of life with all its blessings.

Now, lest I might seem to be tending to the conservative right in these comments, let me now snap back towards the left, devoting my final remarks to today’s epistle from 2 Corinthians. Here the realm of healing moves from the medical and the relational to the communal and the economic. Paul is upending a typical calculus of wealth and poverty to establish a new social and economic order. In the Church at least, solidarity and mutuality are to replace competitive positioning and an anxious, self-preserving

scarcity mentality. It's not about being put under pressure to part with our money, we're told, or for this to be in any way burdensome. It's simply about following the logic of our ecclesial belonging. This is who we are in Christ. The challenge is to embrace the liberating gift of a new identity and come to dwell in an atmosphere of giftedness. As the Old Testament readings today steer us away from a mood of grievance toward a more upbeat hopefulness, so this epistle invites us to a much looser, freer and more generous sense of belonging, from which new habits of generosity are meant to flow naturally.

In this we see the same release from a bound and oppressed way of life as we see with that woman and that girl in today's gospel. In all these cases the God of the Old Testament, who comes to us up close and personal in Jesus Christ, restores human beings to relationship, taking seriously the things that are most central to human life: relationships and sexuality, along with the whole agenda of money, sufficiency and mutual obligation. The steadfast love of God sets the whole scene. And the physical intimacy of our Eucharist provides

the context for these reflections, as we gather shoulder to shoulder and as we're touched, reassured and fed by Jesus with his own body, with his own lifeblood. This is meant to seduce us away from an aggrieved and burdened life and restore us to embodied relationships both personal and communal. God's gift to women is at work, leaving no-one out.

The Lord be with you ...