

## Love as the power which makes us whole

Sermon by Andy Wurm, Pentecost 6, 1<sup>st</sup> July 2018

How are we to take miraculous healing stories such as those in today's gospel? Even if we don't believe they really occurred, probably part of us would like them to be true, because there are times we would like that sort of thing to happen to us. Right there though, something is revealed to us about how we approach such accounts. We tend to focus on something happening to us – revealing that we have a mechanical perspective on miracles and perhaps on healing too. This has not always been the way miracles and healing have been seen in Christianity. Initially the focus of so-called miraculous events was on a person growing closer to God. In other words, they felt more at peace, had greater courage, began to serve the poor, developed a sense of humour or things like that. Later with the emergence of science, the focus changed to how things could have occurred. The *effect* of what occurred was ignored. To understand these two stories of Jesus' healing we need to look at the effect upon those involved.

Here again is another important point –who was involved? With the young girl, the fact that her father sought Jesus' help reminds us that, at least he was also involved. Sickness can affect an entire family – and friends too. In the case of the woman, the gospel writer wants us to know that her situation involves not just her, but the whole society she is part of, and further than that too. Her twelve years of suffering are symbolic – the number twelve representing the nation of Israel, with its twelve tribes. Her blood loss, draining her life away, represents some way in which life is being drained away from her society. Here it is specifically to do with the purity code governing the treatment of women with certain conditions. Pushing them to the fringe of society not only denies them social support and nourishment, necessary for their well-being, but it also diminishes society, by removing individuals who have something worthwhile to contribute. That is the specific circumstance we're dealing with here, but is part of the whole treatment and place of women in Israel at that time. We are also being told that through the age of the young girl, also twelve, connecting her circumstances to that of the older woman. The young girl is about to have her life defined and restricted by the box her society has created for her to fit into. Also significant is the fact that the number twelve representing Israel shares the same significance as the twelve symbols of the zodiac, i.e. they stand for the universal context. As the twelve symbols of the zodiac span the skies, so they represent the whole sky, or the whole of everything. This healing story (it's really one with two aspects) is therefore a vignette of Jesus' healing power in all places at all times, and that healing has personal, social and even global, aspects to it, for the well-being of humanity has consequences for the earth too.

I mentioned before the tendency to read miracle and healing stories, mechanistically, in terms of what happens. There is another aspect to that, which is that we then focus on what was 'wrong' and what has been 'fixed', it becomes all about how well a person functions. The trouble with that is that it places value on performance and ability, rather than on the individual. Dysfunction and disability can then result in a person feeling discarded. In this way, the original disease or disability may not affect a person as badly as the way they are treated for having it.

This focus on the functional ability of a person also reflects the way we see a person. These days we are more individualistic than people were in Jesus' day. With this perspective then, healing involves restoring an individual's ability to function as an individual – so they can return to being able to do what they could do before, or even, what they have never been able to do. This ability to see ourselves as

this way has certain benefits, but if we only see ourselves in that way, we are ignoring an important dimension of ourselves, which is that we are social beings. Our connections with others are integral to who we are.

Most of us subject ourselves to continual self-analysis. It's helpful to check how we're going in life and making appropriate adjustments, but it also leads us down a path with dangers, because of the power of individualism in our culture. Self-reflection can dwell upon our flaws and faults. We can pile up all the bad things we've done, missed opportunities and so on. But this is not the whole picture of who we are. We are not just ourselves! We are who we are only in connection with one another, in fact, also only in connection with all creatures and the earth. We are nothing, have no identity, apart from within the unity that God provides for us and all creatures. When we see ourselves within that context, our faults and flaws are less significant.

Today's Old Testament passage about the grief of David over the death of his friend Jonathan and his father, Saul, remind us that our relationships are integral to our identity. David didn't just think that Jonathan's worth lay in his achievements. It was their love for each other that meant so much to him. This highlights the power of relationship for well-being. We feel worth something when others treat us as if we are. The way we treat each other then is so important. Who's in and who's out of society, our friendship circle and so on, matters so much. It's the power to make whole or break down.

This brings up the difference between healing and wholeness. Upon touching Jesus' robe, the woman was healed, but when she responded to his call to come closer, she acquired wholeness. Sometimes wholeness comes about without, or before healing too. Wholeness involving things like achieving peace and calm, greater courage and so on, as I mentioned before, and most importantly, is often a consequence of our ability to forgive – ourselves, others, the world, or even God.

So far, in regard to the story of the healing of a woman and a girl, there is one character I have not referred to, a character who the writer of Mark's gospel includes in many of his stories, and that character is the crowd. The crowd has a lot of power. Think of the power of the crowd at a football match to encourage their team to win, the power of the guests at a wedding to affirm the relationship between two people, the power of the audience at a graduation ceremony to reinforce the conferring of a university degree. But think also of the power of a crowd to condemn, put down, exclude. Often the crowd reinforces stereotypes and fashions and cooperation with the status quo. This can be in regard to trivial matters such as choice of clothing, but also deeply personal matters such as race, age, gender, physical and mental health. In many ways the crowd tells us what we should be, what is acceptable and what, or who, should be excluded or ignored. It is for this reason, that when teaching his disciples to pray that Jesus tells them to separate themselves from 'the crowd', from the influence of society, so as to be free of the agendas and influences which push us in various directions. To pray, you have to shut yourself away from the voices telling you what to be and what to do, in order to be able to hear God's voice. This is what the woman who is healed does, but she does it by coming out of, or separating herself from the crowd. She breaks away from the social rules which tell her, that in her condition, she should distance herself from others and remain isolated, and definitely not, under any circumstance, touch another person, for that would make them unclean as well. But she breaks away from the crowd, thus freeing herself from its power to exclude her, and that is her faith, which makes her well, Jesus tells her. It's what we all need from time to time - distance from the crowd in order to be healed by God, for in terms of healing and wholeness, God is the opposite of the crowd.