

Reflections 13th Sunday of the Year June 27, 2021

A year or so ago, I read Julia Baird's book *Phosphorescence* which connects with today's gospel. She writes about awe in the most ordinary of circumstances and personal experiences. We have in the gospel stories of two women who experience healing through encounter with Jesus. One is a 12 years old girl, near death, whose father begs Jesus to heal his daughter. This story wraps around another story of the woman with a haemorrhage pushing through a crowd to make contact with Jesus. 12 years of visits to a physician ended with her returning to an alienating home, because that which required the loving touch of a person also prevented it. Twelve years of isolation comes to a reinvigorating end as she touches Jesus' garment. This act of social defiance and righteous discontent is a rebellious reach of power that ends 12 years of alienation and loss. Jesus' response to her connects where he feels the power of her presence *in his body*. There is a connection of bodies and their power merge to create the possibility where healing can occur and her truth shared. As she shares her truth, we are called to appreciate the living and dying and rising that women experience. Her story shows that it is costlier to follow rigid rules than prioritise the hunger of the spirit. How many people miss God because of religion's blinding mechanics?

A powerful image in these stories is that of powerlessness. Jairus, powerful the synagogue leader, is powerless in the face of his daughter's sickness. The woman, who was ground down emerges as strong and persistent as she interrupts the very man of power (Jairus) who represents her social exclusion. Jairus, who has wealth, status, position, privilege and societal value, can advocate for his daughter, but is made to wait as Jesus attends to an unnamed woman's wounds.

In many places the story of this woman is optional. It is like a story that cannot be told. It is too confronting or difficult. It is easier to focus on a sick and dying little girl rather than a woman whose state in life is confronting even today. It should not be left out. Her story is crucial to our faith not to mention its special meaning for women who feel a real solidarity with this woman of courage who found a way to have her needs attended to by going to the Jesus, the source, and lets go of whatever baggage in her life no longer works for her. She shares

the struggles of women who endure domestic and sexual violence, the loss of a child, addictions issues, and struggles with infertility. When women gather in the light of faith to talk about their bodies, we could imagine this woman joining them at the table as they share an appreciation of the great mystery that they are. Julia Baird writes of the wonder of her body which has been scarred by surgery for cancer as well as the stretch marks from giving birth. She reflect a resiliency where she might say, 'And still I rise'. Yet, we sense strength and power in the woman in the gospel, though women's bodies are considered lesser and thus the butt for jokes or derision. They are not sufficient for ordination. They do not belong at the altar. They do not reflect the full image of Christ's body and person. Jesus call to Jairus' daughter '**Talitha kum**' (get up) is effectively repeated by his presence, his encounter, with the woman. Women carry within them the gift of bearing new life and bleeding is a sign that they can still give birth to new life. So often this gift of being a co-creator with God has been made into a thing of shame and say that the gift of bearing life makes a woman impure. We say, at all sorts of levels, that a woman is less... than men.

We draw lines across racial, socio-economic, political, national, generational, ideological, religious, sexual, and tribal lines and we withhold dignity, compassion, and generosity from those who do not fit into our particular circle. We celebrate the downfall of those whom we oppose. We deny presence and services to those we believe do not deserve or warrant it. We exploit or neglect or ignore those for whom we have no good reason to care, or from whom we can expect no return. Today's gospel challenges this behaviour and challenges us to change and recognise how the smallest acts of connection and service can contribute to healing and peace. We see that the one who was socially excluded becomes the 'daughter.' She is the centre of the story. She moves from anonymity and being invisible to identity. Her healing comes because she makes herself visible. She does the dangerous thing; she steps out of the crowd. The one who was marginalised dares to come to Jesus from behind to find herself whole and standing tall before God. In a real sense, the liberation, the healing, the restoration all result from daring to interrupt 'the silence of injustice'. There are no worthy and unworthy, or winners and losers, for Jesus. The poor are not cured at the expense of the rich, or vice versa. We are all loved, we all get news chances at life. No one needs to lose. The only thing

standing in the way of our ability to enter this new reign is our choice, and our ability to respond to Jesus' challenge: 'Do not fear, only believe' (Mark 5:36). To truly care about the poor means we cannot hold them at arm's length. Jesus came to 'bring good news to the poor' (Luke 4:18). He came - in the flesh - to be with us. Many people we rub shoulders with have 'wounds' that others do not know - torture, rape, abuse, HIV/AIDS, cancer, and mental illness. All seek help, peace, comfort, acceptance, and welcome. Jesus does not talk about dignity or indignity; acceptance or non-acceptance; welcome or rejection but radiates healing through his love. Our actions demonstrate who we are.

Given the social dynamics of the day this woman's action was audacious. Such actions have a long history among marginalised populations. During the HIV/AIDS crisis, individuals and groups challenged the complacency about the disease. The May 2017 ***Uluru Statement of the Heart*** was an audacious call by First Nations people that they would be heard and no longer be anonymous or be just counted. The ***Black Lives Matter*** movement is protesting and resisting institutional racism and police violence.

Today's gospel highlights the need to be audacious, to act boldly, to interrupt the silence and established order. What this story highlights is the need for individuals, particularly those on the fringes of the accepted social order, to act boldly on their own behalf. Martin Luther King, Jr. said in his ***Letter from the Birmingham City Jail***, 'We know through painful experience that freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressor; it must be demanded by the oppressed.' So for a marginalised group of individuals, the only option many times is to come out of the shadows — out of the closet — and press for liberation. That means that we must also exercise an active presence, solidarity that helps people find ways out of fear, darkness and enslavement. When Paul speaks of generosity, he is not merely referring to charity but an expression of solidarity. The ministry of giving, active presence, is about justice, not just charity. We can be great at practicing charity but not justice which is more demanding. It is easier to see people as needy to be tended to rather than as people with human rights which may be violated and need to be upheld. We can provide individual support for people but fail to address the political, economic and oppressive realities that cause or contribute to their crises.

The truth is, though, that our failure to love and serve the 'other' leads to greater division, suffering and insecurity in our homes, neighbourhoods, and countries. Whenever we view another person as 'not like me', we have contributed to the suffering, division, and violence in our world. And today's gospel is an indictment of this. Loving enemies or outcasts is never easy, but remains a central gospel call and a central mark of the truly Christ-centred life. We are reminded that God is a God of life who desires the wellbeing of all people – the rich and the poor; women and men; young and old. Because all is gift we are called to respect creation and each other. The greatest enemy of Christianity is not atheism, but sentimentality. Jesus is not the cosmic fix for those who suffer, the most effective solution to circumstances that discomfort, trouble, or annoy. Such sickly pseudo-Christian sentimentality turns an encounter with the living God into an individualised therapeutic event and Jesus as nothing more than a walking first aid dispensary

The Christian response is to unflinchingly encounter her suffering and quietly remain there, doing one's always inadequate best to be as present to her. We may fail, fall short, but we will be present to one another. Is this not being eucharist for the other? We see in Pope Francis one who has a healing effect on people – even those who have become sceptical about their faith. He sees and seeks out the person others do not see or choose to ignore or fear. He speaks and does things we are not accustomed to. He speaks of mercy rather than making legalistic interpretations. He wants us to see what Jesus sees. It is the primacy of mercy, for both Jesus and Francis, over all other values when dealing with others is something our tradition has not held up forcefully or clearly enough. But – it's a new day. *'I will not allow my life's light to be determined by the darkness around me.'* (**Sojourner Truth**)

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