

St. Ninian's Parish Church

Sunday 1st July 2018

2 Cor 8: 7 - 15; Mark 5: 21 - 43

Almighty God, your Son our Saviour Jesus Christ is the light of the world. May your people, illuminated by your Word, shine with radiance of his glory, that his love may be known in the world as he lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit one God, now and forever. Amen.

Last weekend I visited Shetland with a friend. We sailed from Aberdeen to Lerwick, the main town on Shetland; 14 hours in a storm with a rough, rolling sea. We couldn't actually hear the noise of the wind for the noise of the boom every time the ship's hull crashed down in to the waves.

Have you ever sailed to Lerwick from Aberdeen in a storm? If you ever do, I can give you some advice. Our seats were in the prow of the boat. Don't sit there. Instead, try to find a seat in the middle of the boat. When we boarded the ship, when all was calm, I noticed that in the middle of the boat was what looked like a first class lounge of the sort commonly found in airport departure halls. Of course, not travelling first class, I ignored it and gave it not a second's thought.

Later on, when all was not calm, a member of the crew told us that sitting in the prow was the worst possible place to sit and that we should move to the middle of the boat. We did so, hastily, only to find every seat taken. We began to feel worse and worse, my stomach was a milk churn of movement, and my mind became a misty fog of mugginess. It was then in unthinking desperation that we strode with undaunted purpose straight in to the first class lounge where surprise, surprise there were plenty of comfortable seats.

Despite the sea worsening, within an hour of sitting in the first class lounge in the middle of the boat with my eyes closed, I began to feel much, much better. My mind cleared, and I looked around to discover where I was. I knew I was where I shouldn't be, but still I didn't care and I didn't move an inch until the seas started to calm down a bit somewhere north of Orkney.

When we are afflicted with stomach churning sickness, the things unthinking desperation can force us to do; the boundaries it will drive us across; the normal etiquettes of class distinction that the misty fog of sickness blinds us to; I experienced them all on that journey last weekend.

That physical illness is often as much about the ailments of social class as anything else, and that ill health can often be endured if not cured by a change in social circumstances, that is to say that our physical wellbeing is linked to our spiritual wellbeing, is a tale told in two other stories this past week. This past week the winner of the prestigious UK Orwell Prize for political writing was announced, it is a book called *Poverty Safari*, written by Darren McGarvey whose upbringing in Pollock in Glasgow was one of deprivation, poverty, alcoholism, drug addiction, anger and violence.

Poverty Safari is a vivid inside account of how the pressures of deprivation create a spiral in which physical illness, mental illness, addiction and violence thrive. Amongst other messages Mr McGarvey has a political message aimed particularly at those searching for an antidote to populist anger in an age of Donald Trump and Brexit, "It's not rocket science:" he says, "listen, and those who feel ignored will re-engage passionately."

"...listen, and those who feel ignored will re-engage passionately," is the message at the heart of the third story this week that concerns itself with the physical and spiritual consequences of deep and enduring class divides.

In the Gospel reading this morning, the writer Mark tells a story about Jesus' encounter with a woman and a girl. The structure of his narrative in which the story of a woman who has been haemorrhaging for 12 years is sandwiched within a story of a dying 12-year-old girl indicates that these two stories are linked together.

These two female characters have many other common characteristics beyond their appearance in the same narrative and their association with the number 12. For example, they are both unnamed, while the two male characters Jesus and Jairus are named. They are both at the mercy of their society, while the male characters exhibit power in their society. One is Jairus' daughter, and the other becomes Jesus' daughter, 'My daughter, your faith has cured you,' he says.

There are also startling differences between these two female characters - all a consequence of their social class. The 12 year-old-girl has someone important to plead her cause, a protector, her father Jairus, whereas the woman has no one, although she finds a protector in Jesus. The girl, because of her father's standing, is supported by society, the woman because of her social standing is repeatedly failed by her society. Mark says that she is ill "in spite of long treatment by many doctors, on which she had spent all she had." She will of course eventually be cured by Jesus for free, and we shouldn't forget that.

The woman, who has to act for herself, lives outside "the crowd", in the words of Mark "behind" the crowd, and consequently is unseen by Jesus' disciples. Jairus is also outside the crowd, but not behind the crowd, he is very much at its head, and is bold enough to come up to Jesus, speak to him and to be seen and known by the disciples, and named by Mark. Jairus is listened to, and passionately engages with Jesus because his class status lends him boldness.

Jesus, on the other hand, also listens to the woman, but it is her desperation that drives her to flagrantly cross a class boundary, to break the social rules, something that no one would think to do in any other circumstance. When Jesus listens to her she reengages passionately, falling at his feet, telling him the whole truth.

In a week when the UK government announced a very large increase in spending on the National Health Service, the prize winning book *Poverty Safari* and the Gospel story we read this morning both tell us, more than that, they insist that we realise, that spending more money on doctors, even if we spend all we have, will not itself cure the nation's health. These stories say that if we want to do that, then we must address the inequalities and the disadvantages that people face within society; if we want to improve the physical health of our society, first we must address its spiritual health. Paying attention to people's spiritual needs is just as important, perhaps more important, than seeking to address their physical ailments.

In that respect the woman and the girl in the Gospel story are not cured by money, but by faith, specifically faith in Jesus. "My daughter, your faith has cured you," says Jesus to one. "Do not be afraid; only have faith," Jesus says to Jairus. But, as always in Jesus' world the first shall be last and the last first. The faith of the marginalised woman ensures that she is cured first, which leads to Jairus' daughter apparently to die, only for faith rather than privilege to ensure that she is restored to life later on.

This faith in Jesus, this faith in the spiritual well-being of society and of individuals in it, this faith is a belief that despite their circumstances these two unnamed female characters - one who is marginalised and one who has apparently died - despite their circumstances, nevertheless spiritually they both have a place in the society in which they live, and that place is an equal place. This faith, this belief that despite our circumstances we have an equal place in society proves to be more powerful than health care and more powerful than privilege,

In *Poverty Safari*, having delivered a political message about listening to those who are most often ignored, Mr McGarvey does not just blame his upbringing and society at large for the state he is in - for being ignored -, he goes on to address his own spiritual predicament. He writes, "You are no use to any family, community, cause or movement unless you are first able to manage, maintain and operate the machinery of your own life."

He applies this message as a way for communities who feel they have no voice, and despair of mainstream politics, to be able to effect change. As Mark wrote about the woman haemorrhaging, 'If I can touch even his clothes, I shall be cured.' Just as Mark was withering about those doctors who took the woman's money, but couldn't cure her, Mr McGarvey is withering about what he calls, "the poverty industry", run by the middle classes, for doing things not "with ... [marginalised] communit[ies], but to [them]."

When we baptised Murray this morning we all made statements and took promises relating to faith. Books like Poverty Safari, and stories from the Gospel of Mark like the one we read, explain why faith is no small thing in our society, but is perhaps the most important thing.

When we promise as a congregation and as parents to bring Murray up in the Christian faith we are promising to ensure that he grows up to believe - to have faith and to believe - that he, like everyone with whom he will live in his society when he is older, has an equal place in that society and that he and they should be listened to with an equal respect and treated with equal dignity.

But, more than that, we promise that we, because of our faith, will strive to pass on to him, and to all those children who start their life journey with him, a society that first and foremost addresses the needs of the poor and marginalised before it addresses the needs of those who are wealthy and privileged. We believe that everyone has an equal place and we promise to build a society in which everyone does have an equal place.

This faith in Jesus Christ, which demands that we believe that we are all daughters and sons of God, that we are all loved by God, that it is our calling as human beings created in the image of God to love each other, this faith in Jesus Christ is the thing that will save us all, as a society, from the ailments that blight lives, far more assuredly than however much we spend on doctors, even if we spend all that we have.

Now to the one who can keep you from falling and set you in the presence of his glory, jubilant and above reproach, to the only God our saviour, be glory and majesty, power and authority, through Jesus Christ our Lord, before all time, now, and for evermore. Amen.