

St. Bride's Church of Scotland, Newtonmore

And you shall live

Rev. Catherine Buchan

Sunday 22nd April 2012

Ezekiel 37:1-14

Mark 5:21-43

Have you ever had real, proper flu? Not what is known as man-flu (or the common cold) but real influenza, when you ache and shiver and can hardly move your limbs and really just want to die? And suffering the complete indifference to life which the illness brings, can you remember how it felt the first morning when you felt a bit better, when the idea of breakfast had a little interest in it after all, when you thought you might like to see if you couldn't persuade your legs to carry you downstairs at least? And then the next day, when you were able to notice that the sun was shining, and that there were books you might read or life going on, on the radio or television which might actually be interesting; and maybe if someone suggested it, you could eat a horse! When you have been so ill and indifferent to life, the restoration and resumption of normality can be truly exciting and can remind you what a blessing normal life is. The repeated promise of Ezekiel comes ringing home: "And you shall live!"

Last week we read the beginning of this section of Mark's gospel, and saw how the encounter of Jesus with the demon-possessed man could be read as a story of resurrection. Today we read of two related miraculous encounters, with the ill woman and the dead girl. In one of these encounters there is a physical bringing back to life, and yet, these are not resurrection stories. They are stories of restoration. Both the woman and the girl are restored to their old life, unlike Legion, who was given a whole new life. Unlike Jesus who rose to a whole new life. Unlike us as well, who are promised and given a whole new life. "And you shall live," says Ezekiel!

The stories in this part of the gospel are related, and the thing that they have in common is not resurrection, but life. Life is the hallmark of God's kingdom. New life, restored life, better life. Life is what Jesus was all about, and it is what his church, his followers are about as well.

The stories we read are intertwined very closely, which is why we read of both the woman and the girl in one day: Mark tells it that way. The two protagonists are connected, not because they have ever met: they wouldn't have. You can be sure of that, because Jairus was a ruler of the synagogue, and the sick woman was ill with a complaint which would have rendered her ritually unclean. For twelve years she had been unable to enter the synagogue, she had been rejected by the respectable people in society, who cared about their religious standing. Jairus would have ensured that his daughter could not come into contact with such a one. For twelve years she would have been protected from unclean influences, until now she stood on the brink of her own woman-hood. Twelve was the age at which marriage might be discussed for a girl in that society.

The two most concerned in the stories have not met, but they are to meet with Jesus in the same day. They are both to meet with Jesus because they are in their different ways, beyond human aid. The woman has consulted here there and everywhere, and she has spent all she had, whether that was a lot or a little, so that now she has no more hope of even seeking help. The girl is at first dangerously ill, and later is dead: far beyond human hope or aid. But of course neither of them is beyond God's help. The vision of Ezekiel in the valley of dry bones reminds us that you can be not only recently dead, but dead and desiccated and mingled with the dust and God can, if he wants, still come to you and declare "And you shall live!"

What Jesus does for both the sufferers is to give life. Mark tells us that when the sick woman reaches out to touch Jesus he is “immediately aware that power had gone forth from him.” (v:30) In giving life, power goes from Jesus: the Greek is difficult but intends to convey that Jesus is the source, not just the conductor of power. He is the mains supply, not just the wiring that carries the electricity to the device’s plug. The conductor, the wiring, is faith; for Jesus says to the woman “Your faith has healed you.” For her the act of reaching out is faith in action. We don’t know just what kind of faith she had. In connecting Jesus’ garments with his power, she may have been one of those who saw Jesus as a kind of tangible magic, such as we have seen before. Her faith need not have been theologically perfect and thought-through, it need not have been 100% confident that this would work. But it had to be acted on.

When we reach out to Jesus we too are showing him our faith, even though we may know it to be uninformed, tentative and wobbly. Faith is not theological knowledge, it is belief put into action. God’s grace is such that he responds to the action despite the muddle of thought which may lie behind it. When we reach out to him, he in turn reaches out to us, and his reach is far greater than ours.

Jairus' act of faith is to come to Jesus in the first place, and to continue on with Jesus after the news of his daughter's death reaches him.

So the two stories are interwoven and connected at many levels. There is one difference, though. The woman was healed in public, while the girl was raised in private before only a small and intimate group. Maybe it had to be like that. The woman was publicly known to be unclean. She was excluded from society because of it. Everyone needed to know that she was better if her life was to be fully restored to her.

Lots of people knew that the girl was dead as well: you didn’t call in the mourners if you were unsure on that point, and the mourners would make such a racket that the news would be known far and wide: especially with the girl coming from a prominent family. But Jesus makes light of the situation. He says that the girl is sleeping (which was a synonym or euphemism for death, but might, of course also be taken at face value). Jesus didn’t mind if they thought that they had been wrong, that the girl really had been deeply asleep or even in a coma. If news got out that Jesus had power over death itself, then his ministry would end: he would either be mobbed by the recently bereaved, or his threat to Herod and the priests’ power would be intolerable. And of course the girl herself would become a phenomenon, a freak. Later on, Jesus will bring his friend Lazarus back from death, and John tells us that shortly after that, those plotting to kill Jesus also took thought to having Lazarus killed as well, since having him living, walking about was a focus for the story about Jesus. They didn’t want to have in their midst a living reminder of what Jesus had done. (John 12:9-11)

When Jesus restored to life, he restored to full life: life in society for the woman, life in family obscurity for the girl: lives which they wanted and needed. For different people and at different stages of life different things are desirable. God knows us as individuals. He wants what is best for you as you, not as a generic human being, and he knows what is best for you as you, as the person he made you to be.

Life. It is what God is all about. From the very beginning of creation we see God involved in creating and sustaining life. It is because life is important, human life is important, and the quality of human life is important that laws were given, to protect us from harming each others’ lives. And when the laws did not do all that was needful, it is why Jesus came. He said that he came to bring life in all its fullness (John10:10).

Life was what Ezekiel was talking to his people about too. They were in exile, far from home, not

having the lives that they longed for, so that it felt as though they might as well be dead. And Ezekiel came to challenge that assumption, that feeling, and remind them that no situation is beyond God. His was not a facile message, that God will make everything all right. It was a challenging message that the people should remember, admit where they, individually and as a nation, had gone wrong in the past. They should recognise that they have had a hand in their own fates. But nevertheless, God had not abandoned them, and would come to bring them back to life: the life that they longed for, life in their own land, without fear and oppression.

Mark's stories of the woman and the girl being restored to their proper lives, also bring hope to us. They bring hope to us when, like Jairus, we reach out to Jesus in prayer for the lives of family and friends who are threatened with illness. They bring the hope that when we reach out to God in Jesus as the woman did, he doesn't wait to check that our faith is all it should be before he responds. And they bring hope to us as a church, when we feel that our best days may be behind us, that we are weary and ageing and not as strong as we should be. That is when we need to reach out to God, in Jesus.

We love our church here in this parish, (and if you are visiting with us, I hope and expect that you love your home church too), but although being part of this church is important to us, we would none of us say that it is perfect. If it were, we shouldn't dare attend, lest we spoil it perhaps! We look around on a Sunday and are glad to see the familiar and unfamiliar faces, but there are faces we do not see, whom we wish we did: the faces of family, perhaps, a younger generation who live close by but for whatever reason are not with us; the faces of neighbours, perhaps. And we don't know what else we can do to help those we do not see realise that being part of God's family is not dreary, a living death, but dynamic. We don't understand how to share God's promise that when we turn to him he declares to us that "You shall live!"

Mark tells us that the first stage in knowing God's life, in having life restored to us, as a church as much as in individuals, is to turn to God in faith: faith which does more than think or feel or speak: faith that acts. Sometimes churches get a bit precious about faith and prayer. I have known churches which become paralysed at the prayer stage of reaching out to God in faith. They pray and then they don't know what to do next and so they more-or-less sit around waiting for God's answer to drop from the skies. That, believe me, is not faith. Faith prays to God and then takes risks by acting: doing *something* is nearly always better than doing nothing. When God showed Ezekiel the vision of the dry bones, they did not rush together and then have sinews and flesh put upon them just so that they could sit around. They became an army, they stood on their feet a vast multitude ready for action.

You shall live, says God to us, when we turn to him and admit that in parts and places, or in the whole of our lives we are dry and lifeless. And he means an active life.

LAGGAN It is a year since we devised our five action points to take forward our future focus for this church. All of them are now up and running. And that is just year one. In June we will begin to consider what might be the next year or two's steps, activities that we should undertake as a church. God says to us "You shall live" and if we believe it, then we will keep on praying and keep on seeking and trying out the best ways to bring God's love to our neighbours here.

ST. BRIDE'S Recently some of the Board and Session visited the Messy Church in Aviemore, to see one model of reaching out to families in the community. We haven't reached any conclusions about what would be right for us to do, but this may be one way forward. Recently with our friends at Laggan, the Session has begun considering the blessings and two-way benefits of developing a twinning with a congregation of the world church. Active things, things which we can do as we

reach out to God in faith, always praying that he will help us to live his risen life, and reach out to those who need his life as well.

To the woman, to the girl, to the exiled and despairing people, to those who reached out in active faith God declared "You shall live!" And he says it to us too. May we never stop reaching out and acting on what we believe.

Amen