

Fifth Sunday after Pentecost, 1st July 2012

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Lam 3: 19-33; Ps 30; 2 Cor 8: (1-6) 7-15; Mark 5: 21-43

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Over the years lots of possessions get lost, don't they? One thing I had, and have now lost – small but irreplaceable – is a tape recording made from a radio programme years ago. It was a programme about funeral laments, what in Ireland they call *keening*.

The practice of ritual wailing at funerals, always by women, is very ancient and found in many cultures. The tape had recordings from West Africa, and from the Arab world as well as from the West of Ireland. The sounds are different but somehow similar, wild and unearthly, heart-rending.

It is the sound of women wailing for the loss of a loved one or friend, and deeper than that, somehow wailing for all the sadness in the world. It's a grief which touches the depth of our sadness, and I find it very beautiful. In the Christian world it has often been thought to deny the gospel of resurrection, and especially in Ireland the Church has sometimes done its best to stamp it out. In truth it is about honestly emptying out our sadness to make space for consolation.

It expresses something of the place women have often played, having to wait passively while action is done by men. TS Eliot in a poem about the sea speaks of time passing slowly 'Time counted by anxious worries women, / Lying awake, calculating the future, /… When time stops and time is never ending' – for those who have to watch their menfolk go off to sea, and can only wait and hope they will return.

There is grief in our world which does not go away. Think now of grieving women (and men) in Syria, wailing for those who die in towns bombed by their own government. Think of those who grieve now in Afghanistan for loved ones who have been lured on to leaky boats and left to sink in the Indian Ocean, on what they hoped was the last stage of a journey to freedom.

Our readings today begin and end with such ritual laments. At the end of the Gospel story the women are keening, weeping and wailing outside the house of Jairus, grieving for his daughter, struck down in her youth (or so they think).

And at the start we heard verses from another lament, from the book called 'The Lamentations of Jeremiah'. It's a misleading title because the book is not by the prophet Jeremiah, though it was written in his time and concerns the exile of

Israel which he predicted. It's a communal lament for the nation's loss, and it would be sung by a chorus of women.

Unlike keening, this is not a spontaneous or personal cry but highly structured (perhaps the structure helps to keep grief at bay?). Hebrew poetry has a special verse form for such laments, with three beats followed by two: da da da / da da. It's a hypnotic, halting rhythm (not always heard in translations), but hear these:

My flésh and skín decáy / and my bónes are broken.

He has máde me sít in dárkness / like the áncient déad.

In this same mood, and in the same sad rhythm, we hear the chorus speak:

The thóught of my afflíction and hómelessness / is wórmwood and gáll.

They are lamenting the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonian armies, the captivity of the leaders and, most of all, the loss of the Temple of Yahweh. What do you do when the centre of your world has been knocked out? Do you turn to some easy solution? – worship some other god, for example? If Yahweh has been defeated must not the gods of Babylon be stronger? Isn't that the sensible way to go? Or do you wait and hope?

The speaker, despite her affliction, finds hope in this:

'The steadfast lóve of the Lórd never céases, / his mercies néver come to an énd.' They are néw évery mórning / Gréat is your fáithfulness'.

God's *hesed* and *emunah*, his steadfast love, his faithfulness: that's a rock that you can cling to even when all seems lost.

So the lament becomes a song of assurance and hope – as shown in three verses (25 – 27) which begin with the same Hebrew word *tov*, good: The Lord is good / It is good to wait / It is good to bear the yoke in youth.'

'Good' because what you find if you wait (rather than jumping to easy and comforting solutions) is the overflowing compassion of God. God may cause us grief for a while and for a purpose; he may seem to be angry, but the anger does not come from God's own will, or from the heart, it is to call us to himself if we can trust.

And so in the middle of this fearless and boundless lament for the nation's loss there is a statement of trust, that despite the pain, represented by the wailing of the women, and deeper than that pain, is the love and compassion of God.

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We are still in the world of women when we turn to the Gospel, where we hear two stories wrapped up together about Jesus healing a woman and a girl. Mark clearly wants us to read these stories together because has put one inside the other: Jesus hears about the child, and on the way encounters the woman, before he goes on to the house where the girl has been given up for dead.

The linking of the stories seems very natural (and perhaps it happened just like that), but it is told with great skill, and Mark emphasises that these stories belong together, as a pair, by using link words to join them. There's the number twelve: the woman has been sick for 12 years, the girl is 12 years old. The child is called 'daughter', but so (surprisingly) is the woman. What does Mark want us to hear?

But first let's enter into the woman's story. Like the keening women in the Exile, this woman has gone down into a place of affliction, on the way to death. She has a flow of blood which no one, not even doctors, can stop. The words used suggest that the flow is a special woman's flow, from her vagina.

According to the Law women would be regarded as unclean during the days of their mentruation: they would have to refrain for some days from touching others, and from household tasks like cooking. They would need the help of others during that time to do what they could not do.

But a flow which occurred outside the monthly period, or worse, a flow which went on permanently, was totally disabling. It put you in a different category. There was no way you could live a normal family life, and such women were often quarantined away from the community. She may well have thought, like the author of today's Psalm, that she had gone into a place of death, and was cast off by God.

But what she has, in this condition, is an extraordinary assurance, or knowledge. When she hears about Jesus she says: 'If I but *touch* his clothes I will be made well' Does she sense the healing energy flowing out of him? When she touches his cloak, and is healed, she knows it immediately, 'in her body', just as we are told Jesus 'knew in himself that power had gone out of him'.

Her awareness is operating beneath the level of logic or normal observation. She surely can't see the flow of energy, but she knows. It was that knowledge which gave her boldness to press through a hostile crowd and touch the teacher's cloak. So when she is found out, and comes in fear and trembling, knowing that she has defiled this teacher by her touch, what she receives in his affectionate word 'Daughter', is more than physical healing, it is acceptance back into the community.

The story's all about flows: she has a flow of blood which is flooding the world with uncleanness; but the counter-flow is stronger. Healing energy flows into her, turns back the tide, and brings with it the over-flowing compassion of God for his suffering people. For as the ancient song said, 'the steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, God's faithfulness never comes to an end'.

The same boldness we see in the other story too, when the father Jairus, comes and throws himself at Jesus' feet, and begs him again and again to come and heal his daughter – regardless of what people think about a man in his position, a leader of the synagogue, demeaning himself before a mere travelling rabbi.

Then Jesus comes with clarity and absolute certainty to where the child is, in the place of death from which no human power would hope to reach her. Ignoring the mourners, Jesus takes her hand and speaks to her with the simplicity, the

intimacy of a mother waking a child from sleep: 'Time to get up, little girl', and she does.

The theme of uncleanness comes in here too. If she is dead (as the wailing women are quite sure) to touch her is to render yourself unclean. But the flow of life and cleansing is stronger than the flow of death.

And there is something else: if she is twelve years old she may be a little girl but she is of marriageable age. To speak tenderly to her in the word 'talitha', and take her by the hand, would in other circumstances be a gesture of betrothal. Is the teacher going to marry her? Or has he compromised his position? It is a sign of compassion, affection going beyond the bounds of propriety, as Jesus becomes a vehicle not of personal affection but of the abounding love of God who has called her back from the gates of death, betrothed her to himself.

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When we see this we might well ask, as the disciples did in the boat, as we heard last week, *Who then is this?* that even wind and sea obey him? Who can calm the sea if not God, whose spirit hovered over the waters of chaos at the beginning? Who can bring life back from the dead, if not the Lord of the living and the dead?

The stories witness to Mark's faith that in Jesus the presence of God the Holy One is found in a lakeside town on Galilee: in one who does what God does, speaks as God speaks, turns back the tide of death and destruction calmly and with love.

The stories also say this: that who God is can appear in any human life. Like Jairus, like Jesus, God is not afraid to compromise his position. To say as we do that Jesus is Lord, is the one in whom we find God, does not mean that God desires to be seen in only one exclusive, authorised representative, agent, son.

There are three signs in these stories of those who are one with God and God's purposes.

First, there is the knowledge, the deep bodily awareness of what is going on, which we see in Jesus and also in this sick woman who most people would not even look at. She knows who Jesus is as surely as Jesus knows that the girl is not dead.

Second, there is the trust that God's judgement on impurity and sin does not come from God's heart but gives way to compassion. She knows that too, as does the author of the Lamentation, as does Jairus the girl's father, and jesus of course.

And with this awareness and trust there is thirdly boldness. She is able to act boldly, to seize the cloak through which will flow the healing power she needs and knows God desires to give her. Jairus too boldly throws himself at Jesus' feet, just as Jesus boldly cancels the funeral and dismisses the wailers, ignores the tut-tutters and takes her by the hand.

Can we learn these things?

What practices will open us over time to an *awareness* like that, of what is really going on, beneath appearances, in our community, in our world?

What contemplation of scripture and experience will give us a *trust* like that so that instead of doubt and vagueness we know the rock-solid compassion and steadfast love of God for us?

Armed with such awareness, such trust, when are we going to start *living boldly*?

Who then is this? What we see in Jesus is who God is, and who God wants *us* to become.