

PENTECOST 5 YEAR B / 1ST JULY 2012 / EAGLEHAWK 10 AM.

Is there such a thing as perfect health? How do you know when you are perfectly healthy? From what I understand, there is a constant war being waged by our bodies against all sorts of possible threats to them. Those processes are complex and quite amazingly effective in the main. Deepak Chopra, in his book "Quantum Healing" compares the use of a human made drug with the pharmaceutical activities of the body going on every moment of every day. He suggests that our inner pharmacy has an inbuilt intelligence which allows it to produce the exact form of antibody in the precise dosage and apply it at the precise moment for the length of time it is required. By comparison he says that the so-called active ingredient in a humanly derived drug contains extremely little if any of that intelligence. While the body's application of the appropriate chemical is precise, orderly, and beautifully orchestrated, the results of man-made drugs are extremely crude by comparison. In fact, they are chaotic. Injecting adrenaline, insulin, antibiotics or whatever into our bodies gives them a jolt. These introduced chemicals flood all the receptor sites of our cells without coordination from the brain. Instead of talking to the body, they assault it with single-minded insistence.

Let me read you just one passage from his book which sums it up in a nutshell.
(read "Quantum Healing, p.45)

Now I share those things because I think that when it comes to healing stories in the Bible we can get them way out of proportion in terms of their importance. We are walking daily miracles. Sometimes we may not feel like it, but the processes happening within us every day make the most advanced efforts of medical research look like child's play. That, plus the fact that any healing that does take place in the bible – taking nothing away from the effect it had in the human context in which it occurred - is nothing more than a temporary reprieve from an inevitable end.

The world of health and illness is never static. We are constantly moving somewhere between two continuums of perfect health (however we may define it) and the ultimate expression of imperfect health which is the demise of our bodies as living organisms. That fluid state can become the pathway to experiencing new possibilities for spiritual, emotional, physical and relational transformation. And that, surely, is the point of the healing stories in the bible, and particularly in the story which we have before us today. It is not the healing of two human bodies that is important. It is what that healing meant either for those inhabiting those bodies or for those who have a deep care for the person represented. Put another way, health and well-being are not just about our bodies. True our bodies when experiencing dis-ease (ie a lack of ease) call more stridently for attention than perhaps do our spirits or our relationships. But there are plenty of very, very shriveled spirits dwelling in magnificently healthy human bodies, while there are plenty of whole and beautiful people living in damaged and disabled ones.

If it was merely a matter of having healthy bodies, wouldn't Jesus have been better to have simply gone about healing everybody, and continue to do so by the spirit in future generations? So, it is with the question of the meaning of these particular healing stories against those thoughts about health that I wish to look at the stories this morning.

As is Mark's wont, he puts one story inside another. We've already noticed that earlier in the gospel. It is the arrival of Jairus, a ruler of the synagogue, with his desperate plea for help that sets the movement of the passage. We miss an important variable unless we understand that it took a very resolute spirit for Jairus to do that. He was the one who was supposed to have the answers, the authority, not this unlettered preacher from backwoods Nazareth. Put another way: Jairus would have had to step out from the confines of his colleagues in the religious establishment and their expectations of him, in order to come to Jesus. But notice, he doesn't just come, but he falls on his face before him pleading. He had to step out from the crowd, the crowd that would have told him to keep his dignity and not be vulnerable to this hick preacher.. he had to step out from that crowd to find the help and healing that he sought for his darling daughter.

It is worth pondering the question some time: who are the crowds, who are the groups of people whose expectations of us would keep us from being able to acknowledge our own vulnerabilities, our own weaknesses, our own inner turmoils of spirit. Could it sometimes even be this congregation? Our families? A club to which we belong? None of us has it all together, no matter how much we may play the game. These two stories tell us that it was in their vulnerability and their willingness to step out from the crowd that would have kept them contained that two people found the healing of Jesus.

Jesus and Jairus set out with this crowd of thrill seekers pressing them on every side, possibly moving with more urgent tread than normal. And Jesus stops. Not only stops but asks what to those with him seems like a nonsense question: "Who touched me?" If you are standing outside the door of Myer a half an hour before the Boxing Day sales with people pressing you from every side – not that I have, but some of us may have – in that context you would hardly ask the question "Who touched me?" unless it was a very particular sort of touch. And it was a very particular sort of touch that Jesus experienced that day as the author says.

(read Mark 5:30)

The word in the Greek translated "power" is $\delta\upsilon\lambda\alpha\mu\iota\varsigma$ *dunamis*. It is the word from which we have our word dynamite. I have no idea exactly what is meant by that phrase about power going out of him, except to say that it seems to me to refer to something like the reverse of an electric shock: instead of power surging into your body, power surges out.

Now make no mistake, at this point in the story, the woman is healed. The previous verses make that quite plain.

(read 5:27-29)

So why, in this urgent context with Jairus' daughter lying critically ill, would Jesus stop and make her step out of the crowd?

It seems to me that this woman was a victim several times over. She is a victim of this disease which she suffered. That was bad enough. But in that religious culture, she was also a victim of the religious laws: a woman with a flow of blood was rendered ritually unclean and was banned from being in public contexts and from religious festivals. More than that, as the narrative makes clear, she was a victim economically: "She had endured much under many physicians and had spent all that she had..." (verse 26) In that sense, she was a victim of this crowd and their attitudes to her who would have been avoiding any contact with her in its ritual cleanness vis a vis her uncleanness. Inside that crowd the woman is unclean and is completely vulnerable. Stepping out from that which defines her as such at the call of Jesus is the trigger for her to leave behind that definition of who she is.

And in front of that crowd she gives her testimony.

(read 5:33-34)

The phrase "has made you well" in other contexts would be translated "has saved you". It is the Greek verb $\sigma\omicron\zeta\omicron$ = *sodzo*. The noun form of the verb is translated "salvation". So it is a very full and rich statement Jesus is making in this social context. Sure the woman has been cured of the flow of blood, but much more has happened. She has been saved. She has been restored in that religious and social context to a full and active and unjudged life.

More than that, look at the title by which Jesus addresses her, especially against the background of the original urgent call which set him out on this journey. He is going to save a daughter, and on the way another daughter is restored to full humanity. And did you notice how long the woman had suffered from this disease. Twelve years. And how old was Jairus' daughter? Twelve years. This woman had suffered not just the physical pain and discomfort of her condition but also the social and religious ostracism that flowed from it for as long as Jairus' daughter had been alive. While Jairus had enjoyed twelve lovely years of fatherhood, this woman had suffered those same twelve years in physical and emotional pain. Too right, she had as much if not more claim on the attention of Jesus as had Jairus. And Jesus in naming her "daughter" names her inclusion into God's family: she is God's daughter.

A story like this of this unnamed woman invites us to ponder our religious and cultural understanding of disease. For many years, mental illness suffered from a very damaging social judgement, as though suffering from a mental illness was a sign of something nefarious in a person's life. Even some physical ailments have been interpreted that way. I suspect it is still the case that those people who contract AIDS are seen in a different light from people who contract other sexually transmitted diseases. Some small-minded Christians have even gone so far as to say that people with AIDS have brought it on themselves. Tell that to the millions of Africans who have unwittingly contracted AIDS from partners or even in their mother's womb.

Certain religious cultures see illness as a sign of being out of favour with God, as though all illness is in some measure self-inflicted or a result of the sins of others. Jesus faced that sort of mindset in his time. You remember when Jesus was confronted with a blind person and those around him asked Jesus the question: "Lord who sinned that this man should be born blind: the man or his parents." In the days when germ theory was not even a blip on the horizon, explanations for illness had to be found in the spiritual realm, as were explanations for just about everything else.

I hope we have gone way past those judgemental attitudes: those attitudes which placed this unnamed woman in the parlous and emotionally painful place in which she found herself. Yet, with all our new scientific understanding of germ theory and cell reproduction we are still a long way from knowing exactly why some people contract serious and even fatal illnesses and others don't. It was much easier when there was a theological grid around illness because that made those without disease feel much better about themselves; that they could use the sick person as a scapegoat for their fears and anxieties about the disease the person had contracted. "Oh well, they must have sinned if they have been visited by that illness. I'm safe because I haven't sinned. I know I'm okay."

Without that religious scape-goating that previous religious models provoked we now sense a new vulnerability about disease. Instead of seeing disease in someone else as a way of making us feel we are okay, we now know that we are just as likely to get it as anyone else. Which of us at some time has not had some symptoms and felt sure that we had a certain disease. When I first came down from Alice Springs there was a relatively young man very much my age connected with the Neale Street Congregation. He had an advanced case of motor neurone disease. I had never had anything to do with that disease before: in fact I never knew it existed until I made this person's acquaintance. The disease so touched me that when I had certain symptoms – which were more likely cramps than anything else – I went rushing off to the doctor and asked him to examine me to make sure it wasn't motor neurone disease. He must have thought I was a bit nuts, but he is kind enough not to have said so.

The common thread of experience in both the people in the passage who sought healing is that they both experienced and recognised their vulnerability. It was a vulnerability born out of desperation but it was the means by which they found the healing and help they needed. We tend to avoid being vulnerable: we insure everything, even our health. We wrap our lives in as many layers of protection as we can in order to be less vulnerable to the things in life which may hurt us. These two people were drawn by their vulnerability to discover a courage within – a courage which allowed them to be and act differently from what had been their life before. That vulnerability allowed them to step out from the crowd which would have defined them in a way which kept them in the place they had occupied for years: Jairus as a leader who was meant to have it all together, and the woman as someone who was simply a victim of the definitions of others.

Friends, I'm not suggesting we need to confront the same need for healing that was presented here. But I am suggesting that it will only be as we know ourselves for who we are – people who do not have it all together; people who do not have control over all the variables of our lives; and indeed people who often let others define the particular "crowd" that gives us the definition of who we are expected to be; - when we know ourselves as we truly are that we will find the courage to defy those restrictions and meet the living Christ in a new and life-healing way.