

2 Corinthians 8. 7-15

Mark 5. 21 – 43 – with Psalm 130

It is wonderful when children begin to experiment with language. New words seem to spring from their mouths after the child has heard an adult use a word and at some point they seize the opportunity to use this word; often a word used with some degree of passion. Children, so readily learn swear words for this reason. They have heard the passion; and the word associated with that passion and something in the moment leads them to blurt it out; work it into a situation, flagging that: I'm totally on board with belonging here. It's not that they decide with some kind of rational process: This might be the appropriate point to make use of my new word. But it's the passion which brings it to the fore.

My youngest nephew did it one day when he was maybe two or three. Something displeased him, and he exclaimed: Oh, that's disgusting! The others in the room roared with laughter. Which probably put a bit of a dampener on him venturing the use of any further new vocab for a while.

But what he was channelling was the passion he heard in the adults in his life; and he was flagging that he was on board with the socialisation process of what was acceptable; and what was disgusting.

The world Jesus came into was a world concerned with what was disgusting; and what was pure. Pure and impure; clean and unclean. This either/or language lurks in the background for us around where the boundaries of acceptability lie. In Mark's gospel Jesus is confronted with people described as having unclean spirits. And the Pharisees and other religious leaders are vigilant in their promoting of religious purity; It's usually around purity boundaries where the conflict with Jesus arises.

You will recall from the Gospel of John that the first sign – as John calls what we're inclined to call Jesus' miracles – that Jesus performs, is at the wedding at Cana. The grog runs out and so Jesus turns the water into wine. Fabulous. What a great start to his ministry. Terrific party trick. Lots of it; overflowing, and of excellent quality. The best, saved until last. The clue to what John is saying about Jesus and the meaning of this sign – sign of the light coming into the world – was that the empty vessels of religious purity will be filled up to overflowing with the spirit of joy. The religious world concerned with purity is empty, bone dry. And Jesus ministry breaks through these purity codes and breaks down the religious leaders means of control.

So, here in these two stories sandwiched together we have two figures who are disgusting according to the purity code of Jesus' world. A woman with uncontrolled bleeding; and now, not just a sick girl, but a dead one. Jesus should not touch them as they will both render him impure, unclean. We know that he breaks these rules constantly and provokes controversy and conflict. All of this in a very public way. Not by speaking about it, but by action which transgresses the boundaries.

A few weeks ago, reading earlier in Mark, we found Jesus returning to his hometown. He has already courted controversy, so the senior scribes have come five days' walk from Jerusalem to reprimand him. And his family has said he has gone out of his mind. Hometown and family reject him. But in this tension with the religious leaders and his own family Jesus foreshadows a new kinship under the fatherhood of God: *whoever does the will of God is my mother and brother and sister.*

So, as Jesus lifts up the woman who has grovelled to touch the hem of his robe he says to her: *Daughter, your faith has made you well.* In this act of salvation, she is raised up, resurrected and, as she is named as daughter, she is brought into the household of God. A household from which she has been banished for the past twelve years.

And then there is a strange interaction at the house of Jairus. As always, the divine greeting is: do not fear! Jairus family is a family of very high status, he is maybe the most respected person in the town. He is an elite; educated, wealthy, a man of high honour. And his daughter – maybe about marriageable age – certainly ready to be betrothed – dies. She would have been the opportunity to connect Jairus family with another honourable family; she could have married well and increased the status of Jairus and his household.

But she has gone; she has fallen asleep. In Jesus' world the wealthy didn't simply die, like others. Death for them was named in some euphemistic way – she has fallen asleep, she is resting in peace, she has gone to be with the Lord, God has taken her, God needed her. You only need to wander around a cemetery and read the headstones to see the same word play in the world we have inherited. But when Jesus uses the wealthy Jairus' euphemism for death, she has fallen asleep, they laugh at him. We know she is dead, there are no two ways about it: we are stuck down with grief. Say it for what it is, will you.

So, Jesus puts all the others out and together with Jairus and the girl's mother, and Peter, James and John, Jesus does, as he does with Lazarus, he calls the girl out of death. He touches her, again making himself unclean and then she and the whole household are brought into the household of God. A new brotherhood and sisterhood.

What Jesus does is that he crosses over the boundaries of disgust and touches *asgusting* people.

I have dipped into a very helpful book entitled *Unclean* in recent years – exploring the word unclean and what it means in Jesus' time; and what it means in our time. In Jesus world the term unclean denotes things which elicit disgust; things, actions, which bring out of us a kind of visceral response. My nephew Hugo had picked up the adults' energy when they had named something as disgusting – and showed that he was becoming properly socialised.

Richard Beck, the author of this book *Unclean*, lists the kind of things which elicit disgust in us in our own time: Some kinds of foods – offal is one with a good shudder effect; bodily products – faeces and vomit and blood, pus; certain kinds of animals – insects, rats and mice; sexuality – until recently, much of the language around sexuality was about purity – and too often children were socialised that their sexual organs were dirty; contact with corpses; poor hygiene – many of us were raised in some way by the adage that cleanliness is next to godliness – really?, and contact with unsavoury people, the wrong kind of people – I recall certain types of friends in childhood brought out a kind of sneering disgust in my parents.

Beck, in this book, unpacks our human ambivalence about our bodies, things bodily - “humans are most likely the only species that experience disgust, and we seem to be the only one capable of loathing its own species.”

He quotes from a book entitled *The Denial of Death* by Ernest Becker - who contends we are a death denying society. Everything to do with it we push away from us, we sanitise it, talk about euphemistically, rather than plainly. And this denial of death goes to the heart of the religious life and what we think that heaven and hell and whole damn thing is about.

The essence of man is really its paradoxical nature, the fact that he is half animal and half symbolic ... This is the paradox: he is out of nature and hopelessly in it; he is dual, up in the stars and yet housed in a heart-pumping, breath-gasping body ... his body is a fleshy casing that is alien to him in many ways – the strangest and most repugnant way being that it aches and bleeds and will decay and die. Man is literally split in two: he has an awareness of his own splendid uniqueness in that he sticks out of nature with a towering majesty, and yet he goes back into the ground a few feet in order, blindly and dumbly, to rot and disappear forever. It is a terrifying dilemma to be in and to have to live with. The knowledge of death is reflective and conceptual, and animals are spared it. But to live a whole lifetime with the fate of death haunting one's dreams and even the most sun-filled days – that's something else.

Ultimately, the religious task is an attempt to wrestle with this paradox, struggle with, and find peace and hope in the face of this terrifying paradox – I feel immortal but at too many moments of my life I am reminded that I am not. The word religious has its roots in the word for tying up, tying together; the same as ligature. An endeavour to tie together this terrible existential paradox. The paradox at the heart of the church's life speaks to this: the pattern of death and resurrection, the call to die, and so live, to take up the cross (taking the path to death) while knowing that through this lies something of the life of God.

The philosopher Norman Brown wrote that in the last analysis *Christian theology must either accept death as a part of life or abandon the body.*

We have seen too many Christian endeavours that have abandoned the body, to define it as the site of disgust. That we are regrettably shackled to it; but will eventually be free of it when we go to that other place. Too much theology has fed off this innate sense of not being at home in the body and promoted a flight from the world. And with our socialised self-loathing we have misread the healing of this ambivalence which is at the heart of the incarnation – the embodiment of God, in Jesus. Paul who has abandoned his zeal for the purity code and found freedom in Christ writes: So, we do not lose heart. Even though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day.

Richard Beck writes of this tension: *At every turn it seems that the psychological pull of purity and holiness tempts the church into practise of social exclusion and a flight from the world.* When the witness is that Jesus goes the other way. We all probably have stories from our formative years of some person or situation that elicited disgust from parents, or authority figures, or leaders of our churches. Someone who was pushed out or quietly slipped away because they had done something shameful. I get the impression that most of us don't want to be part of such a church.

We might wonder about this question: What does it mean to be at mission if lurking in the background there is a code of disgust at play? They should get a job; why don't they treat their children better; I'm sure they're promiscuous; why do they all those tats? There, is for all of us. This the way we are socialised. But what do we do with it? It can be a learning for us. A signal, that here is someone I am recoiling from, yet who bears the image of God, and possibly needs to be reminded of it. And we might simply pray – for ourselves: Lord Jesus, have mercy on me, a sinner. And go on drawn forward by grace and the all-embracing love of God.

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