



Not nobody but Somebody

At this time of year – around the feast of St Peter which is 29th June, men and women are ordained in the church as deacons and priests. Yesterday at St Paul's Cathedral men and women were ordained deacon for the first time by a woman – the Bishop of London Sarah. And our own John Russell, from this congregation was ordained priest last week and last Sunday I was preaching for his congregation over in Chelsea as he celebrated the Eucharist for the first time. For many of us who are ordained, we think of our anniversaries at this time. For me, tomorrow it will be 23 years.

Women have been able to be ordained priest in the Church of England for 24 years now. In my lifetime and in the lifetime of many here, this huge change – both social and religious – took place. And what was utterly unimaginable for me growing up, is now possible. It's worth remembering that this change has happened relatively recently.

And I was taken back to that time, when I read the gospel for today. For those of us who were involved in the campaign for women to be able to be priests, the gospel we just heard was a very important one.

Feminist and Womanist theologians reclaimed this story – the story of the woman who had been haemorrhaging for 12 years – the woman who pushed through the crowd and touched Jesus and was healed.

Reclaimed it from an orthodoxy that had preached this unnamed woman was a kind of failed human being whom Jesus powerfully restored to society.

Jesus is in a hurry: the leader of the synagogue – the very high status Jairus has asked for his help as his little daughter is very sick. Jesus decides to go, and the crowd, sensing that something exciting is happening, go with him. There's a lot of noise,

commotion. the powerful slightly remote teacher is on his way, surrounded by disciples protecting him from the jostling of the crowd.

For feminist theologians and Biblical scholars, one of the key things to do with this story was to expose the unfairness of the society in which this woman lived. A woman with uncontrolled bleeding was ritually unclean. And although there is a danger in overstating this – thus setting a Jewish set of rules unfavourably against a Gentile abandonment of those rules – it is right to say that even the 1st century Roman historian Josephus records that menstruating women were not allowed in the Temple in 1st century Jerusalem. So this woman would not have been able to access her own religious practices except in the home. And socially she would undoubtedly have been ostracised, with few friends or family willing to stay in touch with her. She may have been wealthy once to pay for the doctors – but now after 12 years she is destitute.

A second key thing for feminist theologians is to rescue this woman from the terminally needy figure that she is preached as. The kind of interpretation that makes us tilt our head at her and say "poor thing", and believe that really she is incredibly fortunate that Jesus takes notice of her. This in historical terms might well be true. But it also places us, as the readers, unthinkingly as one of the powerful people, looking at her and wanting to help. It places us in an unhelpful dynamic of a rescue model of pastoral care that then has an effect on how we see people in trouble today. The truth is rather that some of the features of this Biblical story would suggest a more active interpretation of this woman. She tries to get to Jesus in secret – and touch him without anyone noticing, including him. This is unique in the gospel

stories in that Jesus is not intentionally healing anyone at this point. He doesn't even know that she's there until he senses that something has happened. This woman has courage and agency. She has a plan. And despite the restrictions placed on her, she simply creates her own new normal- where she is out in public, even though she's not supposed to be. She does move towards the preacher, believing somewhere, despite years of conditioning, that she has as much right as anyone else to touch him. His disciples, the inner circle, are, perhaps a bit like security for a celebrity, surrounding him, bundling him along to the high status Jairus's house.

These disciples and this crowd got me thinking yesterday – because the PCC had an away day discussing the theme of welcome and hospitality. We discussed the fact that church is not an easy place to come into – there seem to be a lot of rules and expectations – and even though we really try hard here to speak human – there's still a lot of jargon – not least jargon particular to St James's - and although we'd like to think of ourselves as welcoming, it's not always the case.

We might sometimes guard too closely the version of the faith that we think is right- like the disciples surround Jesus and often try to stop him responding to the people who come to him. The truth is that in this story, Jesus responds both to the high status request and the low status request. He responds to the leader of the synagogue with compassion – and also to this ritually unclean woman. One of our main jobs as a congregation is to welcome warmly anyone – anyone – I will say it again – anyone – who draws close, who stumbles across the threshold. And how we do that will be a topic of conversation for ever – and will change according to the times and expectations we live with.

I preached a sermon a few years ago on this subject of welcome and hospitality – and someone wrote to me saying that something that was in it had given him directly the courage to go home and come out as gay to his family, children and friends. It had been a

hard road since in some ways but he had heard – he said for the first time - that he was invited to God's celebrations just as he was. And he threw a party with some of the sermon on the invitation. And so I repeat part of that sermon here to encourage and thank him and to encourage us to be radical in our commitment to welcome.

*The strong commitment of this church remains to every person – to you – and **every person** whether you identify as gay, bisexual, lesbian, trans and all of you who are not sure or don't know what your label is; as well as every person, **every person** who is straight, rich or poor, single, partnered, married, curious. **Every person** who comes through the door on their legs, with sticks, in a wheelchair, carried in the arms of someone else, every person whatever your age or ethnicity or experience. Our commitment is to you when you are in work, out of work, grieving, glad, anxious, contented, despairing, if your mental health is robust, if your mental health is fragile, if you are in love, or pregnant or wish you were, or worry that you don't want to be, if you're worried about getting older or feeling that you're too young....our commitment simply mirrors God's commitment to you, wherever you come from. It doesn't matter what you are wearing or if you are thin or if you are big, or if you hate yourself or love the sound of your own voice. It does not matter to us because it does not matter to God. Every person, **every person**, whoever you are and whoever you want to be, is honoured here and loved and accepted.'*

But where I want to take us in response to this gospel is actually to this woman herself and her reaching out to touch Jesus.

One of the consequences of the feminist interpretations which I love and which have been incredibly helpful for me personally – is that it sometimes doesn't let us be as needy as we are – male or female.

In our determination to give this woman agency and strength, we can forget that actually we are pretty needy people – and we feel ashamed of ourselves sometimes – and

we try not to – but we do. And then we hear that we don't have to feel ashamed – so we push it down. But somehow it's still there and it sometimes comes back to overwhelm us.

In my experience pastorally, we human beings feel shame about a number of things; sometimes it's money – if we've got ourselves into debt – and we are too ashamed to say that we have – or we're ashamed that we spend too much of it on self-medication – on food, alcohol or whatever it is. We are often ashamed about what we eat or what we drink. We are sometimes ashamed about family – when the reality of our family, our marriage, our relationship, is not what we think other people think it is. We feel shame often about sex and sexuality – such tender subjects – such tender places where our skin seems to be just too thin.

And a secular antidote to that, is an encouragement to feel pride not shame. Next week of course this church along with our neighbouring churches of St Martin in the Fields and St Anne's Soho will be taking a full part in the London Pride march and activities. Our rainbow flag and new rainbow altar cloth will be making an appearance, And we are really proud to be part of it.

But I suppose I want to take that a step further and say that the naming of pride as an antidote to shame is really important but for Christians can only be an interim response – because we are called to a life not of endless pride but of redeemed humility, serving one another. And in any case, the reality is, that embracing the fact that we are proud of who we are often doesn't stop the shame lurking there. And we can't just pretend it's not there.

And the message of the gospel is quite astonishing in this regard. Because Jesus isn't a super hero exemplar, showing us the list of activities we should be doing to live a good life. Jesus is a gigantic signpost – pointing towards the reality of what we can't see – the God who is closer to us than we know.

And this God is reachable, touchable, most especially from our places not of pride but of shame. The execution of Jesus took place outside the city wall, a non-citizen, shamed, destroyed. This is the trajectory of the life of Jesus – towards that moment of shame. The moment of salvation is hidden in a cloak of shame.

And so the miraculous joy of this story is this.

Whoever you are, male or female, you have this woman as part of you.

Where is it in your own life where you are bleeding – where you have perhaps spent too much money trying to make things better? Where have you tried to buy your way out of the sulphurous shame that you feel about the fact that you just haven't got to where you think you should have got to by now?

What is it that you do or have done or have felt that you have never told another soul? What is your secret that you can't bring yourself to face – even by yourself – let alone telling anyone else.

When you have built your own city walls around your own personality, making sure that everyone else thinks you're doing OK – then God is crucified outside that wall; wherever it is that you have banished the part of yourself that you want to destroy, want to ignore, want to class as a non-person.

That is the place, where despite all your protestations that you know God made you as you are and you know God loves you as you are – you can say it in your head but you know deep down you can't yet feel it in your heart.

This is the place. This is the precise place that God is most close to you. In the part of yourself that you feel most tender, most shamed, the bit you won't ever say out loud especially not in a prayer.

It's there that God waits for us and waits to touch us back.

It's shocking – and I wish sometimes that Christian faith didn't work like that – because

it's so confronting and hard to contemplate.
But it does.

I'll end in this anniversary week of ordination with one of the most powerful moments I have ever heard from a preacher about this very story.

While I was training to be a priest, I spent a year attached to a black-led Pentecostal church in Handsworth in Birmingham where I also lived. A lively Pentecostal congregation met for prayer and praise every Sunday I was there, the only white person, learning to dance, learning to rock it out during worship.

An American preacher came to visit – Debra Washington. She got the congregation to stand up and say their own experiences, daily experiences of racism; sometimes low level every day being side-lined, or not listened to or having no one speak to them at work. Right up to violence, name calling and discrimination. There were lots of tears. Not for the first time listening to the dignified testimony of this elderly Caribbean congregation I felt ashamed of my own skin –

I looked at its whiteness and I wanted to rip it off.

And then she said this – to everyone in the congregation, which included me. “This woman is you” she said. This woman was ashamed, she was isolated, she was alone. And she summoned up all her energy, reached out and touched Jesus and he turned around and he said – “Somebody touched me”. No one had called her somebody before. She was nobody. But he said she was somebody. *Somebody touched me.*

And so I close with Debra Washington's words to that congregation all those years ago because her words are also for you and me today. And they are especially for the parts of you that you wish weren't there – the nobody parts of you. You are somebody to God.

Because all those years ago she promised me, and so I promise you, that even today.....

there are angels in heaven doing high fives at the very mention of your name.

Amen.