

The healing touch.

The old King James Version of the Bible, with its olde worlde charm, describes rather delicately the woman in today's reading as 'having an issue of blood.' Well, I want to suggest to you this morning that this woman had not one issue but three, three areas of her life where she was hurting and humiliated and hopeless. And there she would have stayed in her sad and painful world had not Jesus passed by and had she not had the courage – a courage born of desperation – to reach out and to touch the hem of his cloak. So let's examine each of these issues in turn and then consider how Jesus addresses them and transforms her life.

The first thing that must be said of this woman is that she had social issues - issues with society, with the way in which society was ordered and structured in Jesus' day. And that's because this was a society that was organised so that she was utterly marginalised and could find no place, no space to live. You see, this was a society in which matters of purity loomed large. It was one in which chaos and disorder and death were an ever present threat, and chaos, disorder and death attacked through things that were considered contaminated and unclean. Hence the danger of lepers and of corpses – and hence the danger of bleeding women. Such people were a threat and rigorous procedures had to be put in place to isolate them and to deal with those who touched them. And of course that caused segregation, apartheid. It created insiders and outsiders, those who society embraced and those who society excluded. And this woman in our reading was a victim of such a society, condemned to exclusion, a walking health hazard.

There were, however - of course - people who benefited from such social arrangements. Social arrangements always benefit some and in this case it was the doctors who further bled and drained this already haemorrhaging woman. For twelve years her meagre savings had lined the purses of those who offered cures to her and her like. And of course any social arrangement is always policed and enforced by certain key figures who ensure that the wheels of the system turn and that boundaries are not transgressed. So meet Jairus, one such figure: the leader of the synagogue. He is always on the lookout for this woman and her kind lest they breach the boundaries that

imprison and isolate them. She will not show her face in his synagogue. And of course such social arrangements are held firmly in place by God. Such arrangements have a divine mandate and the way society is ordered always reflects the God to whom it gives allegiance. Sociologists have recognised this for years.

This brings us to the second area of this woman's issues: she had issues with God. For this woman life is lived under a long, dark shadow – the shadow of a God who is purity and holiness personified, and she in her uncleanness must live forever under this God's severe frown. Indeed all the people she fears, all the people who continually put her in her place and enforce her isolation – the priests and the rulers of the synagogue like Jairus – all the people she dreads are agents of this fearful God. And I've no doubt that this woman had prayed to God: wouldn't you if you were her? I imagine her knees were worn and calloused from praying, and I imagine her fists were sore from pounding the floor as she pleads for healing, pleads for the bleeding to stop, pleads for mercy. But no. Nothing. Such a God has no time for an outcast like her.

And living in the shadow of such a social order, and on the dark side of such a God, this woman also has issues with herself. After all, it's hard to love yourself when everyone from God down tells you that you're disgusting. It's hard to love yourself when people cross the street when they see you coming, when you hear children laugh at you as they scatter in front of you. It's hard to retain much self-esteem when you're cursed. You see, that is the problem with people like this woman. They internalize society's verdict on them. They internalize the revulsion. And then they loathe themselves.

And you – you are this woman, and you watch young twelve year olds like Jairus' daughter, young women in the first bloom of womanhood. You watch them and you envy them. They bleed too, but of course their blood is a source of pride. It indicates fertility. It betokens the capacity to marry and bear children. This blood is their life, their dignity. But your bleeding is a death sentence. And for the daughter of Jairus the sum of twelve years adds up to fulfilment, twelve years that have led to adulthood and possibility and that anticipate joy. But for you the sum of twelve years adds up to nothing but despair, a dead end and bankruptcy. And while Jairus' daughter skips along with her head held high you walk with stoop, your head bowed low in defeat. And yes, Jairus' daughter is now dead and that's tragic. But at least she died

loved. And perhaps to die loved is better than to live and to be loathed. And at least Jairus' daughter has someone, her father, to act on her behalf, to plead for her, to run to Jesus for her. You have no-one. You must go yourself. You have no-one to love you – not even yourself.

These then are this woman's issues – with society, with God and with herself...

Hymn: Lord of life, we come to you...

Somehow, however, this woman has made her way to Jesus, her last hope, risking being caught. And so she has reached out and touched the tassel of his cloak and in a moment of ecstasy she has felt healing flow into her, and she knows the bleeding has stopped. Alleluia! Her moment of triumph, however, is short-lived. Suddenly she freezes, immobilised with terror as the words ring out, 'who touched me?' This seems to be the final humiliation. She's been caught, exposed. This, surely, is the end. She's been found out. What a shame - why did Jesus have to spoil it? Wouldn't it have been better if Jesus had just left her, left her to sneak away, undiscovered, her secret safe? Wouldn't it have been better to be spared this humiliation before the crowd? Well, no. Because in that moment and in what follows three things happen, three things that heal this woman in a far more profound way, three things that open the door of life for her. For in this encounter with Jesus each of her issues are resolved.

Going in reverse order, firstly, she finds herself affirmed. 'Daughter, your faith has healed you', says Jesus – and those few words offer this woman a new beginning. They open up a whole new world. To begin with she is called 'daughter', and that is actually shorthand. It's code. 'Daughter' stands for 'daughter of Abraham', 'daughter of Sarah', 'daughter of Israel'. In other words this woman is rejected and an outcast no longer. She is addressed by Jesus as a full member of the people of God, a child of the covenant. Her status is restored. And then those words, 'Your faith has healed you'. Get what Jesus is saying to her. Jesus is saying it was *your* courage, *your* determination, *your* faith! Could there be any more empowering words than these? 'You are not the object of my compassion, you are the subject of your own healing'. And suddenly this woman finds herself looking into the eyes of the crowd, the people who have condemned and despised her. And now her head is bowed no

more, and somewhere within her there are the first stirrings of self-love, self-worth, self-acceptance.

Furthermore, however, perhaps in that moment this woman finds a different God. She looks into the eyes of this man of God, this man sent from God, and she sees reflected there not a tyrant who rejects her but a God of compassion and fierce, steadfast love. Perhaps she sees reflected in Jesus' eyes a God whose over-riding characteristic is not holiness but compassion. And so we watch as her old, tragic sense of self is undone, and her old, tragic vision of God is undone.

But wait! In what follows something else is changed, for all the old social arrangements are blown away by Jesus. Think of it this way. Jesus has been touched by one who is so impure. But he understands the dynamics of grace and he knows that it is not him who has been soiled, but rather her that has had life flow into her. And in fact he then goes on immediately to touch the limp, unclean corpse of Jairus' daughter, but again, is he defiled? No! Jesus understands the alchemy of grace. He knows that rather than him being sullied she is made whole. It is not he who is polluted but she who is sanctified. And Jesus therefore treats the whole system of impurity with its routines and its regulations and its protocols with utter disdain. He blithely ignores it all. Suddenly the entire foundations upon which the social order is built are dismantled as an order based upon fear of impurity and death is shaken. Grace is invading and the walls of exclusion are coming tumbling down. No wonder they crucified him.

This, then is a story of healing – but deep healing. It's a story of a woman whose bowed head is raised. And it's a story of a healed relationship with God, as a new vision of God is glimpsed. And it's the story of social healing, of a society based on exclusion learning to embrace. It's the story of Jesus' ministry. Amen.

O gracious and loving God, we pray today for those who are not at peace and whose lives are in need of healing:

We think of those who are not at peace with themselves:

maybe out of guilt over things they have done...

or maybe because they have been made to feel that they are worthless, or failures...

or maybe because they have had the experience of rejection or abandonment...
or maybe because they have been abused or violated...

O God whose great love overcame guilt and shame and rejection come to all
such as these and grant that in your embrace they may find peace with
themselves and may come to love themselves...

Lord Jesus Christ, spread wide the hem of your garment...

O God we think of those who are not at peace with you:

Again, because of guilt or shame and inability to believe that they can be
forgiven...

or those who cannot be at peace with you, perhaps because of things that life
has thrown at them, or because they cannot square what they see of the world
with a God of love...

or because of what they have seen of the evils of religion, or because they've
had bad experiences of church and who want nothing more to do with religion
or the life of faith...

O God help us a your people to bear witness to the God of grace revealed to us
in Jesus Christ, and so draw people to you and to your truth and to you love...

Lord Jesus Christ, spread wide the hem of your garment...

O God we think of those who are not at peace with the society and those feel
the world's cold shoulder:

for those how are unemployed and struggling to make ends meet;

for refugees and displaced people clinging to crafts and risking their lives in
pursuit of a better life;

for those in prison, excluded from society by their crimes...

and we pray today for the government and the people of Greece as they face the
crisis of their economy.

O God may wisdom and justice prevail and may a way forward be found...

Lord Jesus Christ, spread wide the hem of your garment...