

## **Bishop Mark's Sermon: Crossing Boundaries – Mark 5.21-43**

Crossing boundaries can be powerful – and costly.

On my recent holidays I read a new biography of Martin Luther King Jr.

King's fight for civil rights had at its heart the crossing of boundaries.

The first round in that fight occurred in Montgomery Alabama where King had arrived to pastor a Baptist Church.

It was the height of the Jim Crow era, when almost every aspect of public life was segregated.

But it was on the buses that the struggle began.

White passengers got to sit at the front of the bus, while black passengers had to enter by the rear door and sit at the back. The back half of the bus might be full yet have empty seats at the front for white passengers – but that would be enough for the drivers to leave and black passengers stuck on the curb as they drove on by.

For almost a year King and other church and civic co-ordinated a boycott of the bus company. They saw off legal action, threats of violence and the daily grind of organising alternative modes of transport until finally victory was theirs.

There is a photo in the book of King and a fellow pastor sitting in the front row of a bus, the expressions on their faces suggesting not so much triumph as relief.

The boundary had been crossed – and of course there were many others still to come.

King's campaign was not an end itself. He saw it as one step in the formation of what he called the 'beloved community', a society in which people would be judged by the quality of their character not the colour of their skin.

And in that campaign he was of course inspired by Jesus, the great boundary crosser as we see in today's gospel reading.

### **Geographical**

The first boundary that Jesus crosses is geographical.

Verse 21 tells us that

*When Jesus had crossed again in the boat<sup>17</sup> to the other side, a great crowd gathered around him, and he was by the sea.*

Immediately before our reading Jesus has been ministering on the Eastern shore of the Sea of Galilee in Gentile Territory. There he's been confronted by a man naked and out of control in the local cemetery.

But Jesus emerges triumphant – setting the man free from the spiritual forces which held him in bondage.

Now he's back on Jewish turf on the Western shore – but even here not all is well. On this shore there are people in desperate need and to meet those needs Jesus is willing to cross social boundaries.

## **Social**

No sooner is he off the boat when the needs press in on him:

*<sup>22</sup> Then one of the leaders of the synagogue, named Jairus, came and, when he saw him, fell at his feet <sup>23</sup> and pleaded with him repeatedly, "My little daughter is at the point of death. Come and lay your hands on her, so that she may be made well and live."*

Here is someone at the heart of the community, with a position of honour and respect. No doubt his office meant that he was always greeted in the market place, that his name was always near the top of the invite list for any civic celebration.

But there are some doors which position and office cannot open and this man has come up hard against one of them. His beloved daughter is ill, desperately ill, and there's nothing he can do to help her.

Except – he can reach out to Jesus – which he does. And Jesus goes with him.

On the way they're met by someone from a very different social circle.

*<sup>25</sup> Now there was a woman who had been suffering from a flow of blood for twelve years. <sup>26</sup> She had endured much under many physicians and had spent all that she had, and she was no better but rather grew worse.*

The number 12 connects her story with that of Jairus but apart from that their situation could not have been more different. Her flow of blood not only caused her physical distress it also rendered her unclean.

It pushed her to the margins of society; it excluded her from participation in religious life. Perhaps it was Jairus who once had to explain to her why she was no longer welcome at the local synagogue.

We sense something of her position in the way she approaches Jesus. Jairus has done so openly and publicly, but she does so secretly and privately, reaching out for the slightest touch of Jesus' garment in the hope that neither he nor anyone else will notice.

But Jesus has noticed; and that brings us to the third boundary he crosses, a boundary that is both physical and spiritual.

## **Physical/spiritual**

*<sup>30</sup> Immediately aware that power had gone forth from him, Jesus turned about in the crowd and said, "Who touched my cloak?"*

Touch can communicate so much – a hug, a backslap, a gentle hand on the shoulder.

But touch can also be risky.

And so it was in the first century – if you touched or were touched by someone who was unclean you risked becoming unclean yourself.

But that is not what happens here.

Unclean-ness does not go from the woman to Jesus; power goes from Jesus to her. Power that heals. Power that restores.

Touch also recurs when Jesus comes to the house of Jairus.

*When he had entered, he said to them, “Why do you make a commotion and weep? The child is not dead but sleeping.”<sup>40</sup> And they laughed at him. Then he put them all outside and took the child’s father and mother and those who were with him and went in where the child was.<sup>41</sup> Taking her by the hand, he said to her, “Talitha cum,” which means, “Little girl, get up!”*

Once again, in the first century touching a dead person risked making you unclean. But death doesn’t go from the girl to Jesus, life goes from Jesus to the girl. Life which heals. Life which restores.

In crossing the boundaries Jesus has given a desperate father, a dying girl and a marginalised woman what no-one else could.

But there is a layer of healing here that goes beyond the immediate and obvious.

The woman who’s been pushed to the margins is willing to come forward and publicly identify herself as the one who’s reached out for healing.

Jairus, a man who’s position probably required him to be mindful of the thoughts and opinions of others has been willing to stand against the ridicule of the sceptics and keep on walking with Jesus.

In that sense they’ve both become part of Christ’s beloved community, a society where by faith anyone can take hold of the gift of life and healing that is found in Jesus alone.

So where do you see yourself in this story?

It can be tempting to immediately identify with Jesus; to imagine that we are the ones offering welcome and inclusion to others.

And there is a place for that, which I’ll come to later.

But that’s almost certainly not why Mark recorded this account, or why he wrote his gospel as a whole.

At the start of his work Mark describes Jesus’ mission in these words.

*“The time has come,” he said. “The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!”*

And in this passage we get a glimpse of what that kingdom looks like.

It looks like life out of death; it looks like healing out of defilement.

It looks like outsiders becoming insiders and insiders willing to become outsiders.

But we also get a glimpse of what repentance and belief look like.

It looks like choosing faith over fear.

It looks like trusting the word, the power and the grace of Jesus even when those around you are sceptical or scornful or apathetic.

It looks like a university student choosing to identify with Jesus for the sake of reaching their colleagues with His gospel.

It looks like a person struggling with addiction choosing to believe that prayer and community and staying close to Jesus is vital to their journey to recovery.

And of course, there is the call to building the beloved community where all who are seeking after Jesus can find a home.

But that's the point; at the heart of this community is Jesus and his word; not our own efforts to be more inclusive in our own strength and through our own strategies.

You may well be aware that together with other Anglican Dioceses and ministries across Australia we are joining in a campaign called Hope25.

Under the slogan "Hope in an Uncertain World" we are encouraging every Parish to identify one way they can reach out to their community with the hope we have in Jesus between Easter and Pentecost 2025.

How does this passage give me hope?

It gives me hope that we have a message that can speak to anyone

Whether they are a community leader confronted by mortality or a community outcast longing to belong, Jesus calls to them and he calls to us

*"Do not be afraid, only believe."*