

River of Grace

Hosea 5:15-6:6

Romans 4:13-end

Matthew 9:9-13; 16-26

"Oh good, it's the tax man" isn't something you often hear said.

We can today, though. It's nine chapters before we meet the man they dedicated this gospel to, seated in his booth. Seated is the posture of authority. People will come to him. It's the posture of the teacher, too. No-one wants to come to him, but everyone has to. The average present British voter seems to think paying tax itself is distasteful "unless your richer than me." But for Israel then it was insulting as the tax was going to the Roman occupying power. What do you make of a collaborator who does that collection for them and takes his cut? So then what does it feel like for Matthew knowing everyone comes to you but nobody wants to; no one respects you; no one loves you. What does that do to your psyche? We know there is some vulnerability about him because, seated though he is, when Jesus calls him to follow, he leaves it all behind. He is vulnerable enough to know his prosperity is not enough. While we love a bad guy made good story, it is good that the conflicted unpopular tax official is called. His faith potential is spotted. He is included. For most of our roles in society are conflicted in some way. Most of us have to apply policy we're not at ease with; we tolerate or even conspire with a work culture that's unhealthy. Anyone whose job makes them a bit unpopular, or who find they're tempted to alter their job title on a dating profile can be glad the this tax man is spotted by Jesus. There is grace enough for him, so there might be for me.

"It's so moving when leaders show humility" is not something we say often, but might wish to be able to say. A resignation this week sees one capricious self serving ex leader slither away before he's told to go, bellowing it's everyone else's fault, the rancid stench of ego left in the air. The people who made him leader, of course, deny culpability, but really they are the cruel ones, putting someone in a position that's so clearly bad for them. How Jairus cuts through the crap. This religious leader enters someone else's house, interrupts a dinner and adopts the posture of supplication, kneeling before Jesus. "What's the hardest thing you've ever done?" the boy with the mole-fiend asks the horse in delightful tale of a journey. "Ask for help," the sage old horse replies. A leader asking for help, showing vulnerability, is touching. It is good that he is here and Jesus responds to him because it affirms us all in our vulnerabilities but also reminds us to remember our leaders, including the ones presenting revolting behaviour, have vulnerabilities. If only they could be worn well. There is grace enough for establishment people of different kinds, it seems.

"I am looking forward to the menopause" isn't something we hear often. Indeed we hear very little conversation about a crucial and impactful bodily age threshold that more than half the population live through. But we met a woman in today's gospel for whom hot flushes and aching joints would a blessed relief. At last she could re-enter society after the exclusion of constant menstruation. This week Woman's hour has explored again the absurd squeamishness of various media around the subject of perfectly ordinary bodily cycles, but the squeamishness actively inhibits helpful information, and ascribes unnecessary indignity and accentuates anxiety about natural dynamics at the core of young women's being. Mark's account of today's story says the girl who died was twelve years old. She is on the threshold of menstruation, mirroring the woman's unwanted twelve years. They frame the whole life-giving cycle. Between them they represent all women who make possible the existence of all the other figures in the gospel, including Jesus, and who bear the consequences and risk in their bodies.

While the Hebrew Law is somewhat squeamish in declaring such processes as "unclean" (hence this woman's exclusion from society) and the church has been squeamish since, the Gospels are not. Clearly they want to highlight something about their importance and dignity. Indeed Jesus could or should as rabbi be annoyed at being made ritually unclean by the woman's uninvited touch, but he does not. He affirms and celebrates her touch and credits her, not himself, with her healing. (Perhaps he understands. He will never experience childbirth or parenthood, but he is one who gives life to others by the shedding of blood.) Oh, good. Menstruation and Menopause: right here in the gospel, unembarrassed, affirmed, women young and hold freed by Jesus to fulfil their vocation.

"How can you be so tactless, dangling hope in front of a grieving family?" is what might be said to a god botherer claiming they can help someone who has lost a child. But it isn't what the crowd said to Jesus that day, because for all their posturing grief, music and all, they clearly did not really care. All they did when he said the girl was sleeping was laugh at him. Such is the crowd who surround Jairus. I have to say, as a currently ordinarily vulnerable religious leader I am surrounded by a gracious, sincere, exceptionally supportive community, genuinely empathetic, allowing me to minister, concerned but not intrusive. You are a wonderful contrast to that sneering crowd with their fake sympathy. For Jairus to have shown vulnerability among them was all the more impressive. Jesus breaks purity laws by touching the dead girl and she rises to fulfil her potential.

It's worth noting that though he's known for brevity, Mark's account which came first is much more detailed, tension heightened by delays and conversation. Matthew edits the account because he wants a flow of action and encounter, and to show how much can happen when we show a little vulnerability.

Paul meanwhile writes as a fervent Jewish scholar who spent some years vigorously defending his faith as an exclusive and invulnerable identity. Following his conversion he re-reads the tradition he loves and finds he does not have to reject it, but enjoy it even more than he did before, with new insight emphasising that Abraham's faith was ultimately to find fulfilment in the blessing, not of an exclusive group, but of all nations. He is uniquely qualified, then, to re-analyse the precious ancient texts with the lenses of Christ's pacifism and see the grace of God only needing a glimmer of trust in any human heart to find reconciliation and life-giving connection with people who felt God was out of reach.

Abraham's trust was not so much specific expectation of an event – the God will give me a parking place school of thought - as an open-heartedness to God's future which he could hardly imagine. He trusted all would be well in the end. All would find purpose.

Jesus can see the relational poverty of the rich and powerful and has grace ready for them if they will let him in. He knows as Abraham, Hosea and Paul know, it's not religious performance God needs but enough of a chink in the armour, enough trust that with God it will be OK, then he can do amazing things. So, when a religious leader shows a bit of vulnerability, contrasting his defensive Pharisee colleagues, Jesus has grace ready for him. Jesus can see the excluded woman not as a threat to his purity but someone who's vocation in older years is to be set free. He feels her vulnerable trust in the tug on his robe from behind. That's all he needs for the grace he has ready for her to flow to her. He sees the purely powerless child. The ultimate vulnerability, not force but gravity working on her in her stillness. As he offers grace to the dead we are wistful, holding our own bereavements, but by now in the flow of this sequence of liberation we understand, he's showing there is nowhere his grace can't reach.

That these four very different people find what they need without diminishing the others is a real challenge to our zero sum politics where one person's blessing is deemed another's loss. Of course sometimes there's a limit to what goes round. Only one team could lift the trophy yesterday, but in Jesus' economy the glory of the losing team, without whom City would look rather bereft, is still celebrated. In Manchester, United fans could still if they chose see their city glorified without diminishing their own loyalties. Government departments are often pitted against each other in the spending review, but spending on social care will be a blessing to the Health Service. Spending on infrastructure does liberate others' economic activity, and helps the ambulances move quickly. Another country's prosperity does not have to be felt as a threat to our own. Matthew reminds us not to assume it's always either or. It very rarely is.

As much as each example is important, Matthew makes this sequence flow along, each encounter overlapping, so we feel part of its gracious movement. He wants us to feel the accessibility of Jesus and God's grace adaptable to every kind of human being. Sometimes you find yourself by a river that seems content with itself. It flows easily, not thundering too much, not stagnant. The water seems effortless, joyful, meeting obstacles but moving easily round making beautiful shapes, every glossy curve, foamy tumble and rippled surface seeming just right, the water reacting differently to each encounter but somehow making the same constant music. Such is the feel of grace from Jesus, released into different people's lives by their vulnerability. If he can reach all of them, he can reach all of us.