

13th Sunday in Ordinary Time (B)
(Wisdom 1:13-15; 2:23-24 / Mark 5:21-43)
01.07.2018

Many people have great difficulty admitting to the fact that they are suffering. They don't like to admit that they have a problem. They prefer to hide their ills and mask their pain. Increasingly advertising by the Health Council warns us of the dangers of leaving physical symptoms unchecked. It is pointed out to us that many illnesses that prove to be fatal need not be so. Deaths could be avoided if only sufferers would bring their symptoms to the doctor's attention on time! Just last Friday morning on the daily News Bulletin of the BBC the point was made that lives are saved when patients have enough trust in their doctors to move beyond the embarrassment that can sometimes hinder them from describing certain symptoms presenting themselves in their bodily functions. So much for physical ills... When it comes to mental illness, emotional pain, psychological distress and spiritual malaise, people can be even more reticent to admit to their suffering and much slower to bring it to light. So often people opt to suffer in silence and unnecessarily – even being foolish enough to imagine that there is some merit in not acknowledging suffering. Many of us have yet to learn that stoicism is not a Christian virtue! How often we are afraid to call out for the help we need! We shy away from seeking out someone to confide in. We can even fail to present ourselves honestly before the Lord in our prayer, just as we are – and often that will mean in the mess we are in. Sometimes we feel so ashamed of our problems that we imagine God's opinion of us will certainly mirror the *supposed* opinion of others around us. I say *supposed* opinion of others around us because very often people don't see us in as poor a light as we see ourselves. The truth is that we are inclined to be pretty harsh judges of ourselves and in this we can prove to be our own worst enemies. Self-loathing is a deep-seated ill which many of us carry in our hearts. Few of us dare to even begin to appreciate ourselves, let alone really and truly love ourselves. In Bernanos' famous novel *The Journal of a Country Parish Priest* – a book which contains so many important insights (a book President Macron of France offered to Pope Francis in the course of his Official Visit to the Vatican last week) – there is this little line which is oh so true: *It is much easier to hate oneself than one might think.*

When it comes to love of self so often as much as we manage to muster is an unhealthy love of ourselves; we may try to show love to ourselves in unhealthy ways – resorting to selfishness, over-indulgence and the like – but this isn't true love. Unhealthy over-compensation in selfish behaviours is in fact propelled by a difficulty to truly love oneself; it feeds on self-loathing and not on genuine love.

Few of us love ourselves really, truly, freely, simply and honestly.

I suspect many of us greatly resemble the woman we meet in today's gospel passage. Just like her, we feel ashamed of ourselves. At one level – an intellectual level – we may know the Lord can heal us; we may know that we need to approach Him for healing, but we are afraid of doing so – at least directly. It is as if we are too ashamed to face the Lord straight on, in the same way as we can be afraid to expose our malaise to another's regard, for fear of what they might think. And so we may try to come to the Lord from behind, to approach Him sideways, shying away from being up-front, afraid of allowing the Lord to look upon us just as we are. We can fear that if Christ was to see us in all our misery He might reject us. We can doubt that He would look upon us as the gospels show Him to have looked upon all those who came to Him in their

misery. How hard we can find it to believe that the Lord would look upon us today as He looked upon all those He encountered when He walked this earth. I am thinking of all those who stood before Him in a pitiful state. Just as Jesus loved upon them lovingly, with compassion, with a desire to heal and restore their lives and set them free, so He looks upon you and me this morning.

Our problem in all this is that we mirror within ourselves the attitudes of social ostracism we see around us more than we would like to admit. When we *down* ourselves, when we write ourselves off, when we condemn ourselves, we reveal just how hard-hearted we are.

We resemble the haemorrhaging woman we meet in today's gospel when, like her, we can feel ourselves to be unclean; like her we tremble with fear before the Lord when there is no need to. This woman who had been bleeding for twelve years was considered to be *unclean* under the Law written in the Book of Leviticus. Anyone who touched such a woman or came into contact with her would also be deemed *unclean*. This woman's bleeding was undoubtedly a natural menstrual uterine complaint. While her illness was considered as making her somehow *unclean* – and this very quickly became equated to *sinful* – we must ask if this assessment of the situation was really right. Surely not! It could never be a sin to be sick. We have moved on from this detail of the Levitical Law in a sense, but I suspect we haven't quite broken free from it in another way. Here again a recent news report – something dealt with on the BBC News webpage last week – shows us how many women in their work situations still feel ashamed and embarrassed – to the point of considering themselves *unclean* – on a monthly basis due to their menstrual cycle. The article spoke specifically of the case of women bankers who felt ashamed of their situation in the male dominated environment in which they work.

We can all feel ashamed of things we should not be ashamed of: both men and women! How many compulsive behaviours and addictions are considered to be sinful when in fact the person held bound by them is most often not entirely responsible for their actions – and sometimes not at all.

Can you imagine how the haemorrhaging woman felt inside? In Belfast English we might say she must have felt *rotten*! There are times when we feel *rotten*! That's a strong statement; it expresses a very unhealthy feeling!

The haemorrhaging woman had lived as an outcast for twelve years. Her suffering had cut her off from the community. We can understand her reticence to come to Jesus straight on. We can understand why she shrank away from doing so. But look what happened when she did find the courage to approach Jesus. Even though she didn't approach the Lord in full view or in the public eye, she nonetheless turned to Him and Jesus felt this. He picked up on her timid approach and He responded to it powerfully. We read: *a power went out of Him*. I find it consoling to read how sensitive Jesus was to the fact that this woman reached out to Him. We are shown here that Jesus finds ways of reaching out to us powerfully – even when our approach to Him is only a very timid one.

He connects with us. A current of His grace is directed towards us. We read in the gospel: *a power went out of Jesus and the woman was healed*. She was miraculously cured. There was no therapy as such. It was an immediate healing that followed.

There are important lessons for us in the story of the healing of the haemorrhaging woman and that of Jairus' daughter in which it is inserted. What we are shown in these stories is that we should never allow our fear or shame to hold us back from approaching the Lord for healing. I am not thinking primarily of healing from physical complaints in saying that, but also healing from emotional scars, psychological ills and especially the sickness of sin which marks all our lives. The Lord can and will heal our wounded memories and our broken lives if we trust Him to do so. Even when we hold back – at least when we are shy about coming forward and presenting ourselves before the Lord just as we are, preferring to approach things sideways and anonymously – the Lord of compassion finds a way of meeting us more than halfway. All we need to do is to open our hearts up to Him and welcome the power that comes out from Him. It will enter into our lives and transform them.

The Lord is waiting for us, He longs for you and for me to reach out to Him and touch Him today. He will give us what we long for most deeply when we dare to approach Him in faith. The important thing is for us to respond positively to Jesus and to place our hope in Him. This is what we see Jairus do. This leader among the Jewish people was one of a minority who actually dared to show confidence in Christ. We might ask: What was it that led Jairus to do what others among his peers wouldn't dare to do? It was love! Jairus was motivated by love for his daughter and by faith that Jesus could and would help her to live. Love and life were Jairus' motivation. These motives should be ours! So strong was this leader's love for his daughter that it led him to turn to Jesus in faith – risking scorn and ridicule from his peers for daring to follow his religious instinct here. Jairus risked whatever might befall him... and his humble, courageous, love-motivated faith paid off.

The lesson in both the stories we hear this morning draws attention to the importance of humility of heart in regard to the Lord. May such humility of heart be found in us: humble love and trusting faith! If only we dare to reach out to the Lord He will honour our effort and meet us halfway and do great things for us. Our humility draws forth the Lord's love for us; and this love poured into our hearts heals, renews, refreshes and restores our wounded hearts. It recreates our life!

As we approach the Lord's Table this morning, recognising that we are not worthy to receive Him, but He has only to say the word and we shall be healed, may we welcome Him as He reaches into us, touches our hearts, lifts us up, holds us close to Himself – in the same way in which He held *the Beloved Disciple* close to Himself at the Last Supper. In this Eucharist may the Lord nourish us. May He come to us to lead us into an experience of new life in His love!

Amen!