

(Wisdom 1:13-15; 2 Corinthians 8:7-15; Mark 5:21-43)

When Jesus had crossed again in the boat to the other side, a great crowd gathered round him; and he was by the lake. Then one of the leaders of the synagogue named Jairus came and, when he saw him, fell at his feet and begged 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.' So he went with him.

And a large crowd followed him and pressed in on him. Now there was a woman who had been suffering from haemorrhages for twelve years. She had endured much under many physicians, and had spent all that she had; and she was no better, but rather grew worse. She had heard about Jesus, and came up behind him in the crowd and touched his cloak, for she said, 'If I but touch his clothes, I will be made well.' Immediately her haemorrhage stopped; and she felt in her body that she was healed of her disease. Immediately aware that power had gone forth from him, Jesus turned about in the crowd and said, 'Who touched my clothes?' And his disciples said to him, 'You see the crowd pressing in on you; how can you say, "Who touched me?"' He looked all round to see who had done it. But the woman, knowing what had happened to her, came in fear and trembling, fell down before him, and told him the whole truth. He said to her, 'Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace, and be healed of your disease.'

While he was still speaking, some people came from the leader's house to say, 'Your daughter is dead. Why trouble the teacher any further?' But overhearing what they said, Jesus said to the leader of the synagogue, 'Do not fear, only believe.' He allowed no one to follow him except Peter, James, and John, the brother of James. When they came to the house of the leader of the synagogue, he saw a commotion, people weeping and wailing loudly. When he had entered, he said to them, 'Why do you make a commotion and weep? The child is not dead but sleeping.' 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. He took her by the hand and said to her, 'Talitha cum', which means, 'Little girl, get up!' And immediately the girl got up and began to walk about (she was twelve years of age). At this they were overcome with amazement. He strictly ordered them that no one should know this, and told them to give her something to eat.

Well, we had two gospel readings there for the price of one! You will have noticed how Mark 'sandwiched' one miracle – healing the woman with a haemorrhage – inside another: healing Jairus's daughter. 'Literary sandwiches' seem to be Mark's favourite fare: he uses this multi-layered technique many times in his writing, and his gospel is rich and fast-paced as a result.

'Rich and fast-paced'. We could use that same expression to describe the England football team! Having said that, they were distinctly off the pace last Thursday evening; we will see whether they can recover their momentum in Tuesday's quarter-final...

Whilst doing my rounds in Richmond these days I am heartened by the good number of England flags on display in and on people's houses. But the show of support I most enjoy is the cross of St George fluttering proudly on top of our church tower! I hope this gives similar enjoyment to everyone passing by – although I also hope they realise it can be no mere coincidence that this parish church should be flying a flag bearing the symbol of the cross.

I am delighted that we have a flag-pole on top of our church tower – and that we use it well. We also have flags – or rather, 'standards' – on display in the Green Howards' Chapel, each one originating from a particular engagement in the long and distinguished history of that regiment. The use of standards on the field of battle also has a long history, and we might think immediately of Constantine the Great's adoption of the 'chi-ro' symbol on his standards, accelerating the spread of Christianity across the Roman Empire.

Also instrumental in the spread of Christianity – and with less ambiguous motives! – was St Peter, whose feast day was two days ago, the 29th of June. Petertide is the traditional time for ordinations and when we think about the part we play in Christ's Church, founded on rock. our own personal vocation. To mark this occasion our next hymn will be about St Peter: his life, his witness, his example to the rest of us.

Amongst the many incidents which record Peter's mix of firm faith and loss of nerve is his jumping into the sea when he saw Jesus walking on the water. At first, Peter was able to progress towards his Master, but then he became afraid and began to sink. Jesus reached out and caught him, saying 'You of little faith, why did you doubt?'

This is a recurring theme in the ministry of Jesus. On countless occasions he says to people, 'do not fear, only believe'. He said it to Jairus when the crowd were telling him his daughter was dead. He said it to the woman with the haemorrhage who risked everything simply to touch his cloak. He said it in last week's gospel reading, when his disciples thought the boat they were in would be overcome by the stormy sea. Remember, when the disciples appealed to him for help Jesus said simply to the sea, 'Peace, be still'. Immediately the wind ceased and there was a dead calm. Think of the creation account in Genesis: when God spoke it happened.

So he who made the sea can calm the storm. He who made us, and who is our Redeemer and Sustainer, can calm the storms which flare up in our lives. We really do have no need to fear; we really do have good reason to believe. Our risen Lord really does say to us, 'Do not fear, only believe'.

And if we find that we can live without fear, and we can believe that in God's bigger picture 'all shall be well', then we ourselves will be playing our part in helping the spread of Christianity.

As we know, that spread cannot be brought about by coercion or military force, but by the living example of lives transformed and the generosity of loving service. Just as the flag on top of our church tower can be interpreted as proclaiming our support of the England football team or of the Christian gospel, so our lives can proclaim our membership of a club, or of the present reality of God's kingdom: open to all.

The way we live our lives will have a big effect on how they are interpreted, and in this respect perhaps we can follow the example of St Mark and his liking for sandwiches! Our 'literary sandwich' in today's gospel reading comprises two examples of Jesus' healing miracles. Overall, the section of Mark's gospel that we are currently looking at includes a succession of miracles, and this follows another section detailing many parables, and which includes further sandwiches. Overall, the parables all pointed towards the future reality of God's kingdom here on earth; the miracles demonstrate its *present* reality.

So we just need to be aware that what we say and do is multi-layered: pointing towards a future reality and demonstrating a present reality, carrying a surface meaning but also a deeper meaning, and that it is all held together by the living power of God's grace. By this same grace it is through us that, in the words of our first hymn, 'Glorious things of thee are spoken'.

Listen again to the words of the second verse of that hymn:

See, the streams of living waters,
springing from eternal love,
well supply thy sons and daughters
and all fear of want remove.
Who can faint while such a river
ever flows their thirst to assuage?
Grace, which like the Lord, the Giver,
never fails from age to age.

I close with this prayer, attributed to Sir Francis Drake, which reminds us that we are called be aware of the multi-layered nature of our Christian witness.

Grant we pray thee, O God,
that as followers of Christ we may never forget that we are observed of all,
and that our failures may cause others to stumble.
Help us to be true and loyal to the best and highest we know,
and show forth this truth and loyalty in every activity of our daily life.
Grant us the royal gift of courage.
Give us, O Lord, a keen sense of honour,

so that we never give ourselves the benefit of the doubt.
And finally we pray for a true sense of humour;
may its kindly light and its healing power relax life's tensions.
All this we ask in the name of thy Son, our Lord Jesus Christ.
Amen.