

On bleeding and reaching out for love

Pitt Street Uniting Church, Sunday 11 June 2023

A Reflection by Rev Dr Josephine Inkpin

Pentecost 2 A

Genesis 12: 1-9; Matthew 9: 9-13, 18-26

This worship service can be viewed on You Tube at <https://pittstreetuniting.org.au/spirit/reflections/>

Last year, SBS Insight told some of the diverse personal stories of faith, loss of faith, and changing faith, in contemporary Australia. One was of a young Croatian Australian woman who has committed her life to God through a faithful adherence to Islam, including covering her head and body in conservative traditional dress. In this she has found a profound sense of peace and flourishing.

Some significant resistance has however come her way. She experiences some of the continuing Islamophobia within our society, and, in addition, strong extra kickback from some white Australians, not least fellow Croatians. For what, some would say, is a nice, white, western, and well educated, young woman doing taking up such a religious path? Is this not also, some would say, a betrayal of her family, and culture, too? After all, religiously speaking Croatians are almost exclusively Christian, and in particular Catholic. What on earth is this young woman doing? What is happening here?

We might say something similar of the stories in our lectionary this morning, each of which involves a breaking with powerful expectations, and a profound response to needs of salvation which are simply not met by conventional culture or practice. Abraham, Sarah, Matthew, the synagogue official, and, not least, the hemorrhaging woman: each challenge us. They invite us to reflect upon what is bleeding in our own lives, hearts and souls, and invite us to reach out in faith ourselves. For what are our needs that require transformation? What salvation do we seek? What of God is calling to us?...

Now we have to admit that there is some special organising of the texts in the work of the lectionary compilers this week. In particular, it is arguable whether the passage about the two females healed in today's Gospel really sits best with the story of the call of the tax-collector Matthew. Not only does this miss out verses following the Matthew passage, but, as some commentators have suggested, the healing of the two females might be helpfully seen as complementary to the healing of two males in the verses which immediately follow their stories. This places emphasis on the healing and salvation to be found in Christ rather than the call of Christ.

Yet these themes are of course intimately related. As we journey on in the Christian year, beyond Pentecost and Trinity Sunday, it is therefore understandable that we are invited to consider the call of God afresh and what this means for us. Perhaps we variously identify with Abraham, or Sarah, or Matthew, or the women, or the synagogue official (the father), in our stories today – or none of those people. Whether we do that or not, we are certainly invited this morning into reflection on our spiritual needs and how we relate to God in them.

Let us focus especially today on the hemorrhaging woman. Next week, as we hear more of Abraham and Sarah's story, we will explore that further. It is certainly foundational to our faith tradition. The haemorrhaging woman is however also deeply emblematic of saving faith even if she typically has less prominence. That is one reason, alongside patriarchal bias, why she is nameless. For, in a sense, she stands for us all, or at least all who bear great burdens and know their need of God.

For a fuller account of the haemorrhaging woman we need to look to Mark's Gospel chapter 5, from which the writer of Matthew's Gospel has taken the story. Indeed Matthew's Gospel gives us a text which is radically shorter than Mark's and with one or two resulting different emphases. The role of Jesus, for example, is somewhat heightened. Yet Matthew's Gospel retains the key elements of crying need, and healing through faith. It also keeps the significant twinning of the story with that of the healing of the young girl. For the two females in the story sit in symbolic balance with one another.

The one is on the verge of puberty, coming into the full flow of her womanhood, yet in the face of death. The other is a mature woman, closer to death, especially in the face of seemingly unchangeable debilitation: yet from her body issues a constant flow of blood, a sign of life and renewal. The girl is 12 years old. The woman has borne her suffering for 12 years: 12 being one of those symbolic spiritual numbers, reflecting holy community and connection, which both females here lack.

The blood of the haemorrhaging women is surely not insignificant. For, spiritually speaking, blood has deep ambiguity, not least in ritual, liturgy, and theology. On the one hand, blood flowing is regarded as giving life-force and energy, a sign of covenant, a reconciliation sacrifice, a power of love, a seat of the soul. On the other hand, those who are stained with blood can be excluded from sacred actions and sacred spaces.

Blood, spirituality and women have particularly complex relationships. Blood flow during menstruation for example has been regarded variously as life-giving, problematic, painful, restrictive, or a reason for restrictions, and deeply mysterious. Indeed, such associations have historically contributed to the exclusion of women from functioning in male dominated religions.

Such ambivalent understanding of blood on the one hand as pure and redeeming and on the other as impure and unclean is a duality that can be found in many spaces, even in the western world today. Impurity and uncleanness are thus often mentioned when blood is related to women's physicality. Yet, if we are to truly affirm God as fully enfleshed, we need to celebrate God in such feminine physicality.

Such considerations have in the past led some feminist scholars to see the story of the haemorrhaging woman as a critique of ancient purity laws. Marla Selvidge, for example, argued that the religious law of Jesus' world doubly marginalised the hemorrhaging woman - both as a woman and as impure. By allowing her to touch him, Jesus could then be seen as a 'liberal egalitarian' who abrogates the purity laws to promote a more compassionate view opposed to any form of social exclusion based on purity or gender. ⁱ

Whilst that might be a convenient reading for modern progressives today, it doesn't really stand up however when we examine the complex reality of the purity laws of Jesus' day. Without careful nuance, it also offers a form of 'anti-Jewish' interpretation. Other feminist scholars have indeed gone so far as to dismissed entirely the idea of this story being about impurity. In doing so, they point out the complexity of Levitical law and rabbinic teaching and its application in Jesus' day. ⁱⁱ

The significance of the hemorrhaging woman lies between and beyond such feminist contestations. The key element is certainly the ill health of the woman not the purity laws as such. This is the heart of her distress. Yet her specific bleeding is not incidental. As a result of her blood condition, she was ritually impure and fell under certain restrictions of the time, explaining why she did not seek to touch Jesus himself but only the edge of his clothing. Similar purity restrictions were also applied to men.

Yet her story has specific ramifications for the spiritual value of women, not least in particular features of women's physicality and experience. For, as the several different types of persons healed in the Gospels attest, the message for us all is that whomever we are, salvation in Christ is offered to us: whatever our need and longing. That, after all, is another aspect of the twinning of the woman's story with the synagogue official's daughter, and the subsequent healings, in Matthew's Gospel, of the two blind men.

Whilst paying attention to feminist implications of this story, we do well therefore to attend primarily to the movement of the women's faith rather than purity concerns. For we see a profound invitation to us all in the woman's reaching out to touch the hem of Jesus's garment. Out of her deep need, the woman takes courage to cross the boundaries of conventional cultural expectation, trusting that such risk will bring new life. This has its complement in the synagogue official's reaching out beyond the social conventions expected of him. In the woman's case, she is driven by her own years of personal pain which all the experts of her day had not been able to address. In the synagogue official's case, he is driven by his desperate love for his child. Faced by such existential challenges, nothing else matters: not shame, nor society's approval, not reputation nor ritual expectation.

As we will reflect further next week, this reaching out for love is the story of JudaeoChristian Faith from Abraham and Sarah onwards. For just as Abraham and Sarah stepped out in faith, desperate for new life in a place of desolation, owning their deep needs and longings, so with the hemorrhaging woman and the synagogue official, and so too for us all.

We can continue to bleed, in our hearts and souls if not our bodies.

We can stand by whilst our deepest hopes, and our own hearts and souls, descend into death.

Or we can reach out, beyond conventional worldly, and conventional religious, expectations to the living God. Bob Dylan put it well in a famous line in his song, which the hemorrhaging woman might have written, *'It's Alright Ma (I'm Only Bleeding)'*: that whoever *'is not busy being born is busy dying.'*

As Dylan wrote and sang, and the hemorrhaging woman knew so well, life in this world can be truly hard, with so much false hope and disillusionment. Yet, in risking life, in reaching out to touch the hem of the divine garment, we can be born again.

Blood then symbolises the possibility of new life not a draining away into death.

So what is it to be for you, and me? Are we busy being born, or busy dying?

What deep down needs and longings do we have which we are afraid to own?

Will we reach out this day to touch the hem of God's garment? For that is all it takes to be born again.

Even in Matthew's Gospel's reduced version of the hemorrhaging woman's story we see this truth: that it is in this movement of faith, this heart-felt prayer, this reaching out to love that we find salvation – or, as Jesus puts it, in this faith makes well.

I like that. It reminds me of the father of the young Croatian Australian woman I mentioned at the start of this Reflection. Like Jesus, he could have taken umbrage at how his daughter had reached out unconventionally for deeper love and healing. After all, her action implicated him too.

Yet he did not. He stands by her like Jesus, for he knows that by our faith, by our acknowledging of our need, and reaching out in love, all of us find our salvation, our healing and true selves. For God works in myriad ways and seeks our transformation. Amen.

Let us reflect further on our Gospel story today, and the invitation to reach out and respond to God's loving presence, as we hear the story of the hemorrhaging woman told in song. The singer is Merry Clayton, the African American soul and gospel singer and it comes from her album *Beautiful Scars*, produced seven years after the road accident which led to the amputation of both her legs from the knee down. It is witness to the power of God which saw her through that time and to the strength of faith in the wider African American community which has always reached out beyond its bleeding to God's new life. Whoever has ear to hear let them hear...

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZFP61EKCY5w&t=2s>

ⁱ Marla J. Selvidge, *Woman, Cult and Miracle Recital: A Redactional Critical Investigation on Mark 5.24-34* (London: Associated University Press, 1990)

ⁱⁱ For a balanced review of such scholarship see Susan Haber 'A Woman's Touch: Feminist Encounters with the Hemorrhaging Woman in Mark 5.24-34' in *Journal of Studies in the New Testament* 26.2 (2003) pp.173-192