



Blessed Be

September 2021

Welcome to this edition of Blessed Be. Today we have two pieces written by two talented Grail members. I hope you enjoy them as much as I did.

*The first is a homily by **Tricia Gemmell** for the program **Australian Women Preach**:*

Today I am preaching a sermon on Mark 5:21-43, which is about the cure of the woman with a haemorrhage, told within the story of the raising to life of the daughter of Jairus. This gospel is often read in church in its shorter version, with the story of the woman with the haemorrhage omitted. When we do this, we effectively silence her voice.

Earlier in Mark's gospel, when Jesus is teaching the crowds, he repeatedly tells them to listen. We know too that Jesus taught in parables, that challenge the listener to go deeply inside to discover their meaning. To learn from this story within a story we need to go deeply inside and listen.

There could hardly be a stronger contrast than that between Jairus, a leader of the synagogue, and the unnamed woman suffering a haemorrhage. He is rich, powerful, a man of influence respected by society, who has no hesitation speaking to Jesus to beg for his help. She, on the other hand, is destitute, diseased, voiceless, shunned by society, and too ashamed to approach Jesus other than touch his tunic from behind. At the moment she touches him, Jesus is already on an emergency mission, hastening to save the life of a little girl at the point of death. But he stops and turns. He demands to know who it was who touched him. How must Jairus have felt when he saw that woman come forward and take all of Jesus' attention? She came slowly, reluctantly, in fear and trembling, she fell before him, and Mark tells us she told Jesus the whole truth. The whole truth.

Think back to chapter 1, when Jesus first taught in the synagogue, they were amazed at his teaching, because he taught them with authority. Here, in front of the jostling crowds and in front of one of the leaders of the synagogue, Jesus confers upon this unnamed woman his own authority to teach. He invites this woman to tell the good news to those around him, in her own words. Is he not, in fact, inviting her to preach to the assembly?

Mark leaves it to us to imagine what she might have said. Jesus clearly wants to hear this woman's story and he gives her a voice in the assembly, a voice to evangelize not only her first listeners, but us as well. She tells the whole truth of God's healing, saving love, a journey for her from death to new life. For 12 years life has been draining away from her, she has been labeled unclean, unable to be a part of normal society, exploited by doctors until she has no money left. She may as well be dead. But now, she can once again live and work with others. She can love and be loved in return. She recognized the healing power of God in Jesus, and now that healing power has brought her back to life.

Maybe Jesus too was changed in that encounter with her strong faith. After she speaks, he addresses her as "my daughter." What love and tenderness she must have called forth in him. He commends her faith and sends her home in peace.

What did Jairus, distraught about HIS own daughter, see, hear, and feel, in that moment when Jesus addressed this unknown woman as his daughter? I wonder how Jairus might have been changed that day. Did he see things in a new way? Was his heart expanded?

Reflecting on everything that happened after the event, Jairus would have realized that he lost nothing in having to stop for Jesus to heal that woman and restore her to life. It would not have seemed so at the time. What did he learn about his God that day? Did he see something of God's loving compassion for the poorest of the poor?

For us who would be followers of Jesus of Nazareth, what might we learn of Jesus from the events of that day? Observe him closely. Look at the crowd jostling him, the disciples near him, the man who is hoping that Jesus will save his daughter's life, and the woman who knows that all she has to do is touch his tunic and she will be cured. Jesus is hurrying to his destination, the crowds are noisy and excited and jostling him on all sides, and yet he stops and asks, "Who touched my clothes?" To me, this moment always feels like a freeze frame in a movie.

I can feel the stillness in Jesus, his equanimity, his complete and utter presence in this moment. I fall in love with this Jesus every time. There is about him a truly breath-taking centredness. He knows exactly what he is about. It is as if everything in the whole world stopped for Jesus in that moment when he knew that power had gone out from him. There was absolutely no doubt in his mind that in this moment this was where he was needed. Jairus would have to wait, and in the waiting he would learn of God's love for all God's people, no matter their gender, wealth or social standing.

This Jesus is more than a miracle worker. He is one with God, totally in tune with God's love for struggling humanity. Only a deeply contemplative Jesus can be this calm and this sensitive in this noisy, distracted, tense situation. And we know of Jesus' prayer life because Mark tells us often that Jesus withdrew to lonely places to pray. This is what makes him so responsive to the priorities of any present moment, so quickly able to discern the right path of action in the face of conflicting needs. In this story, he knows that this unnamed woman, whose sickness is now cured, is still in need of healing. He gives her the opportunity to be seen and heard for who she is, to be known, not judged but accepted. Telling her story is ultimately what heals her.

In listening to her story, WE are evangelized, WE hear the good news: Jesus is our Saviour and the kingdom of God has drawn near. WE can ALSO be healed if we have faith.

When Jairus was told that his daughter had died and there was no longer any need for help, Jesus said to him, "Do not be afraid; only have faith." And Jairus did have faith. And his daughter was restored to him. But I wonder. Would he have found that faith within him if he hadn't first witnessed the faith of the woman with the haemorrhage? And seen what Jesus had been able to do to her? It is quite possible that she deepened the faith he had that day. And if she could do that to HIM, she can still now do it to US. We only need to imagine her voice in our ears and take care how we listen.

What is the invitation in this gospel? For me, it is to have the courage to raise my voice in the assembly and tell my truth. It is to learn to pray as Jesus did, so that I too may be a healing presence for others.

What is it for you?

*In the second piece **Elizabeth Lee** describes her experience of an at-home retreat during lockdown:*

My Conversations with Silence – A COVID Lockdown Retreat

It was with great disappointment that due to COVID stay-at-home orders I cancelled my 8-day retreat at Warrambui, outside Murrumbateman. I had planned to retreat with "Conversations with Silence," a newly released book by Sally Longley, a gifted Spiritual Director and Retreat Facilitator. Could I come to some arrangement with John, my husband? Could I retreat at home?

Sunday evening, with intention and attention I moved into our spare bedroom. I spread out on the desk my art materials, journal, Sally's book, along with "Music of Silence: A Sacred Journey through the Hours of the Day" by David Steindl-Rast and Sharon Lebell and a recording of "Seven Sacred Pauses: Singing Mindfully Dawn to Dark" by Velma Frye, before slipping into bed. I was vividly aware that these 8 blank days were inviting me to "enter into spaciousness where I could encounter myself and God again." (Sally Longley p29)

I woke early on Day 1, well before dawn when monastic communities would be gathering for Vigils. David Steindl-Rast describes the first canonical hour of the day as "the womb of silence," an invitation to trust darkness. I allow the words of Velma's chant to flow over me.

*In this sacred darkness I sit in silence.
Open in this moment, I trust in the darkness.
Waiting in trust, growing in trust,
Waiting and trusting the sacred darkness.
I surrender. I surrender. I surrender.*



Little did I know how this day would lead me into shadowy places as I reflected with Sally on "The Eloquence of Shadows." On my morning walk I headed to the west, past "SLOW DOWN" writ large on the side street, surprised by the length of my own shadow cast by the winter sun. I meandered around the tombstones at Eastern Suburbs Memorial Park and acknowledged the places of death within me. Then stumbling across the memorial to Arthur Stace who wrote "Eternity" in copperplate handwriting, over half a million times across this city, reminding me that our shadows are "made up of those aspects of ourselves that we have not integrated and from which we are often running, the shadow also holds not only darkness but also the gold of our best selves that we have rejected." (Sally Longley

p25) I returned to my "cell" to paint, journal and to just be.

Day 2 I took a walk to Cape Banks, a glorious coastal walk, and delighted in watching the whales, which were remarkably close to the shore. Yet there are several places along the cliff top which evoke a sense of desert, with the barren sandstone sculpted by wind, water and fluctuating temperatures. An invitation to enter the wilderness, both relishing the desert silence and encountering the internal dragons.

On Day 3 Sally offered the gift of Midrash as a way of repairing silence, through the story of Susannah in the Book of Daniel. My parallel journey was with the story of the previously unnamed "Woman at the Well" but, as I discovered this day, in the Orthodox Tradition she is known as Photini – the luminous one. And in naming her, my own story of shame was once more transformed.

Sally drew my attention to the term "selah" which appears in several of the psalms on Day 4. Selah means a little pause. And what a gift selah was to me this day. I paused as I showered, allowing the water to wash over my face, noticing the voice of Judas – "why wasn't this ointment sold?" alternating with the compassionate reply of Jesus to "leave her alone." I paused before the magnificent sunrise. I paused wandering past the historic cemetery from the days of the Coast Hospital- the broken cross symbolic of my broken relationship with the Church. I paused often as I wandered around the labyrinth, being present to disorientating turns. I paused under the fig tree savouring my cup of tea. The chants of the Seven Sacred Pauses permeated my day. I paused opening to the unconditional love of God, but only momentarily in this place of vulnerability. I was noticing that while the mornings were tending to be charged with fervour and commitment, as the afternoons began to fade, my energy began to lag and disappointments would collect together with a sense of aloneness. I found myself resisting these invitations for elongated pauses and to surrender to this uncomfortable hour.



I made a new friend on Day 5- Ma. The existence of Ma in an artwork has been interpreted as "an emptiness full of possibilities, like a promise yet to be fulfilled", and has been described as "the silence between the

notes which make the music" (Wikipedia:Ma) Sally explores Ma in nature and Icons. I found my attention being drawn to the space between branches, the space between rocks, petals, stamens and leaves. Then there is the space between the waves and the space between the feathers of a bird. The spaces in my understanding, the space in my heart, the spaces in my soul. "There is a crack, a crack in everything, that's how the light gets in." (Leonard Cohen: Anthem) Ma was an invitation to see what many might call negative space as "an emptiness full of possibilities." I would only appreciate later how the emptiness I experienced on this retreat would allow for new possibilities to emerge in both my internal life and amid the "work" that I do.

The final days of this retreat were days of integration where I experienced in a profound way "God comes to us in Silence." As I prayed the experiences of these days, reviewing my photos, rereading my journal, meditating on my mandalas, sitting against trees, dangling my feet in the lapping water of Botany Bay, creating a mandala and photo collage, all of this in a silence that had deepened across these days, I began to hear a new voice speaking. A tiny almost imperceptible voice that was singing the Sext mantra "I will believe the truth about myself, no matter how beautiful it is!" (Vera Frye: In Truth) Truly the gift arising from Conversations with Silence as I journeyed through the Hours of the Day on this retreat. Traditionally I close my retreats with a "Dayenu" a song sung during the Jewish Passover, a hymn of gratitude for the gifts God has bestowed.

Dayenu

*How many are the wonderful things that have
happened to me for which I give thanks to God!*

Had I simply had a retreat amid COVID lockdowns
That would be enough!

Had John given me space and silence over these days
That would be enough!

Had there been opportunities to walk, read and photograph
That would be enough!

Had I prayed the Liturgy of the Hours with Seven Sacred Pauses
That would be enough!

Had I met the Beloved in the Psalms reimagined by Nan Merrill
That would be enough!

Had I been introduced to Selah and her sister Shards of Light
That would be enough!

Had I been opened to Ma's spaciousness in unexpected places
That would be enough!

Had I received the tender gaze of Jesus
That would be enough!

Had I been greeted by the Angel in the Dark
That would be enough!

Had I befriended Photini through my conversations with silence
That would be enough!

Had I become One with the One
That would be enough!

It was enough! More than enough!
I am woman truly Blessed.

Elizabeth Lee, Retreat at Home 26 July – 2 August 2021