



Sermon preached by Revd Alex Clare-Young on 30th June 2024

Readings: *1 Samuel 16: 4-13; Mark 5: 25-34*

Trinity V

The Joint Public Issues Team - JPIT - help the Baptist Union of Great Britain, the Methodist Church and the United Reformed Church pray and work for peace and justice.

When it comes to politics, JPIT ask the question weekly ‘Why not explore politics in the pulpit?’, with a helpful series of political, but non-partisan, discussions on lectionary readings that are currently hosted by the URC’s own Revd. Jenny Mills. JPIT have stated that they are hoping, praying and campaigning for ‘A politics characterised by listening, kindness, and truthfulness’. When thinking and praying about this week’s lectionary gospel reading – and about other ‘healing narratives’ in scripture, that JPIT aim kept coming to mind.

For me, the topic of healing can only be addressed by properly wondering about that phrase ‘Your faith has made you well’. What does wellness mean? Is physical healing always possible, or even desirable? What about people who don’t want to be healed? What about spiritual, situational, and community healing and reconciliation? I don’t have the answers to those questions. I believe, as a minister, it is better to support people to find their own answers than to assert that one view or another is absolutely correct.

As you can imagine, this topic has become particularly important to me. I was struck, when digging into the Greek for today’s gospel reading, those key words ‘Your faith has made you well’ might – if using the fullness of the words – also be translated as ‘Your good faith, trust and reliability has brought you into right relationship’ with God and with your fellow human beings.

This expansive translation makes sense of the ‘shalom’ understand of wellness, where an attention to reconciliation of body, mind, and community in light of justice and peace is a continuing process through which God’s love and grace can be enacted and understood. When our personal and political realities are tumultuous, mired in actual and cultural wars, choked by divisive conflict and split in two by structural injustice, the search for shalom is both a longer – and an ever more vital – pilgrimage.

So I would like to take you on a pilgrimage with some of those who experienced shalom – or wellness – in scripture, ending with David, Jesus and, last but not least, our own reflections, decisions and actions this coming week.

You have a small labyrinth in your order of service [*the labyrinth was displayed on the screen: some coloured spots mark points in the labyrinth*]. You might like to follow it with your finger or pen as we go on our labyrinthine pilgrimage. You might prefer to simply notice it on the screen or even to close your eyes and imagine a more beautiful journey.

Mark 5:25 “And a woman was there who had been subject to bleeding for twelve years”. Cultural norms and religious laws would have excluded this person from the rest of society by cultural norms and religious laws whilst she was bleeding. She wouldn’t have had the freedom or the platform to share her views with others. She was effectively silenced, shut out of the public square. When Jesus met her, his first step was to seek her out, his second was to listen to her story. Telling our stories – having our voices heard – is a part of shalom, of reconciliation. I wonder who is unheard today ...

We continue on our journey to the pale blue stop. Here we meet the man suffering from a skin condition who Jesus healed and then sent to the temple to show himself in public. This person was so feared by society that he had to ring a bell wherever he went, causing them to flee. Jesus’s final step, when meeting him, was to send him into a very public, very sacred space. His disability – his difference - was hidden from society, Jesus encouraged him to show his true face without fear. Being truly seen – not using all of our energy to hide our vulnerabilities – is a part of shalom, of reconciliation. I wonder who is not fully seen today...

Let's journey round and down and up again to the green spot. Here, we meet a child whose father fears they are dead. The child is surrounded by people shouting and crying and playing music, as was common in such situations. Jesus didn't rush to perform some sort of dramatic miracle with no pastoral care offered to the person at the centre of the drama. Instead, his first step was to banish everyone outside, granting the child the privacy to get up at their own speed, in their own way. Being given space – not crowded, made into drama, or gossiped about – is a part of shalom, of reconciliation. I wonder who is not given enough space today...

Come round to this yellow space, where we meet a person with mobility difficulties lying by a pool where people who were ill and disabled bathed. He couldn't get into the pool, and the people just kept pushing past him. A lot of people push past me these days. Jesus didn't simply push past him or even push him straight into the pool, though. Instead, he starts by asking how he can help. We see this in another story too, where Jesus asks a blind person what he wants. He cared for people in the ways they sought, not based on his own assumptions but based on what they asked for. Being asked about our opinions and needs, and having those respected is a part of shalom, of reconciliation. I wonder whose opinions and needs are not respected today...

Let's continue on our journey down to this orange place. Once, a group of religious teachers asked Jesus if the blind person in their midst had sinned. Jesus said no, neither he nor his ancestors had sinned. There was, in truth, nothing wrong with him. It's all too easy to confuse morality with justice, whether it is the cultural link between sin and sickness in biblical times, or the accusations levied around about people who rely on financial benefits today. Being reminded of the truth that there is nothing wrong with us is a part of shalom, of reconciliation. I wonder who is made to feel like there is something wrong with them today...

As we move towards the centre of our labyrinth, before travelling back out to the margins, we come to a red circle. There are several stories in scripture about Jesus helping people on the sabbath – the day of rest. Breaking the rules to show that he cared. It is all too easy to get caught up in rules, rather than empathy. Knowing that people are willing to prioritise other people over a broken system is a part of shalom, of reconciliation. I wonder who we need to prioritise today...

Heading back out to the margins, through a twisty, turny path, we come to a pink space. We are going back in time, now, to our passage from the Hebrew scriptures, to the anointing of David. In that passage, we meet Samuel, who is being called to anoint a new leader. He is on the verge of making the wrong decision – making a judgement based on appearances and norms – when God guides him to David. Finding guidance and direction is a part of shalom, of reconciliation. I wonder who we need to seek guidance from today ...

And as we finally head back in towards the centre, the point where we can rest, we journey through this purple area, meeting David. David was a youngest child, left out of the meeting, excluded from the decision making, ruled out of the count. And David was the child God chose to become not only ruler - even with all of his human flaws - but also to become the ancestor of Jesus. Being loved, and noticed, and chosen just as we are, even when others put us down or see us as other, is part of shalom, of reconciliation. I wonder who we are being called to love, and notice, and choose today...

And so we reach the centre of the labyrinth; a place for rest, reflection and discernment. Earlier today I asked the children and young people to make a choice. One hymn or another. We all have choices to make this week – some that we make every week, others that we only get to make once every few years. I encouraged you to listen to the children in our midst as we make choices together. Through this reflection, I have pointed to how we might listen to the voice of God through other people. Whoever we listen to this week, let's journey together with each other, and with those seeking God's shalom and reconciliation.

Alex Clare-Young
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