

2CH Sunday at 7.30

Talks from the NSW Council of Churches

When shadows fall and hopes grow dim

Presented by Bob Smith

There's a wonderful line from an old gospel song that says, "*Above all else the world needs Jesus, when shadows fall and hopes grow dim.*" I'm sure many of us have known times like that. Chronic pain and sickness is certainly one of them - the sort that is there day after day after day. Chronic conditions are very debilitating because eventually people realise they just have to live with the problem and hope of release fades away. Even the Old Testament book of Proverbs recognised that sense of hopelessness in its final chapter where it says, "Give beer to those who are perishing, wine to those who are in anguish; let them drink and forget their poverty and remember their misery no more." But the words of that old gospel song remind us that we no longer have to endure the shadows alone; "*Above all else the world needs Jesus, when shadows fall and hopes grow dim.*"

There's a beautiful story in Mark's gospel, tucked inside the middle of another, better known story about Jesus going to a rich man's house to raise his little daughter back to life. The story I'm referring to is of a woman who for twelve years had suffered from an incurable haemorrhage which caused a constant discharge of blood. Mark's account says that she had been to many doctors and had suffered much because of them. In the process she had used up all her money and now was in worse condition than when she started.

Haemorrhages like that were a common enough complaint in those days, and the Talmud - the writings which formed the basis of Jewish law and tradition - actually laid down eleven different cures, some of which were mere superstitions - like carrying a barley corn found in the dung of a white she-donkey. But the real tragedy of this illness was that, under Old Testament law, it made a woman unclean. Leviticus chapter fifteen decreed that a woman with such a discharge of blood was excluded from worship and no-one should lie on or sit on a bed or seat that she had sat on. It was another example of how religion, which ought to be a blessing and consolation, can become an added burden when it becomes legalistic.

So this poor woman not only suffered pain and trouble from her illness, but also endured the loneliness, shame and rejection of being shut out from other people and denied the comfort of her religion. But somehow she had heard of Jesus, and even though Jesus represented both the world of healing and the world of religion, both of which had let her down badly, she instinctively knew that he would not fail her.

Her problem was how to get to him. She couldn't go up to him and ask him to touch her and heal her, as other people could, because religious law said she was unclean and not to be touched. It was even wrong for her to mingle with the crowd because everyone she touched also became 'ceremonially unclean' under that same law. She was probably ashamed to call out, thereby letting everyone within earshot know that she was an untouchable. So, she merely edged up to him and touched the fringe of his garment, which meant the four tassles that Jewish men wore at the four corners of their outer garment.

These tassles, based on words taken from the Old Testament book of Numbers, were symbols to remind them that they were Jews and were to live by the commandments of God. And that's how great her faith was. Other people got to ask Jesus to touch them and heal them. Jairus, the important man whose daughter was

dying, was able to go to him and ask Jesus to accompany him to his home to heal her; but this woman, whom the medical profession and the church had failed, could only stand back and attempt to touch a tassel on the edge of his cloak. Yet her faith in him was so great that she believed that was enough. And it was - she was healed instantly.

Looking at this story now from Jesus' perspective we see some wonderful things. Firstly, it happened when Jesus was on his way to help the young daughter of an important man. Jairus was the ruler of the synagogue. His daughter was dangerously ill, at the point of death. In his desperation he was prepared to put aside all the prejudices that the Jewish leaders had about Jesus and seek his help as the only possibility of saving his little girl. So, Jesus was here on an important mission. He had been sought out by a very influential person who desperately needed his help; and, what's more, the whole crowd knew it.

When you are a humble preacher with no great standing in the community, to be thrust into the role of a rescuer by an influential person before a crowd of admiring people, is heady stuff. And there are many servants of God, I suspect, who have been seduced from their true calling by this very thing - the need to be acknowledged by important people. Not so for Jesus; in the midst of this drama, he stopped to give his attention to one woman who was an untouchable. As we read the story, we get the feeling that at that moment the crowd, for Jesus, had ceased to exist, and that she was the only person who mattered - even though he was on a mission for a powerful and influential man. And in this we see the ideal that every servant of God should aspire to.

The second thing is found in the words "*Jesus realised that power had gone out from him.*" When Jesus healed it always cost him something. In a sense this was a pre-figuring of what he ultimately paid to bring healing and forgiveness to the whole of humankind - his sacrificial death on the Cross. It is probably difficult for most of us to understand this, but those who do have a healing gift - whether it be a gift that brings physical healing to the body, or emotional and spiritual healing to the mind and spirit - often speak of the cost to themselves.

I know of people who do or have had a genuine gift of divine healing who speak of how they themselves experience the pains that are the lot of those for whom they are praying. Gifted pastors and counsellors know what it is to feel depressed and emotionally depleted following encounters with troubled persons whom they have been able to help. Even preachers feel it after delivering a sermon which truly engaged their heart, soul and mind in preparation and delivery. The point is that no real spiritual help is ever given except at the cost of something to the healer.

So it was for Jesus in this situation. He knew that power had gone out from him. And in this we have a pre-figuring of what it was about to cost him to bring healing and salvation to the world.

So Jesus stopped and demanded to know who had touched him. The disciples said to him, in effect; "*Oh come on! Look at the crowd all around you. Any one of them could have touched you*" But Jesus insisted, "*No, someone definitely touched me; I know it. I felt the power go out of me.*"

Finally, the woman herself, anxious and afraid, realised she couldn't hide away any longer. Trembling and embarrassed, she told him the truth about her condition and how she had known if she could only touch the hem of his gown she would be healed. And she had felt it in her own body the moment she had touched his garment. Like most ministers, I often pray for people who are sick - that that God will be with them bless the those who treat them; and when it seems that they are beyond medical help I usually find myself praying that they will have strength to endure their sufferings and for a peaceful passing from this life to the next.

However, there have been a few times when I have been specifically asked to anoint patients with oil and pray for a healing that the medical profession has not been able to effect. It hasn't happened often, but there have been a few occasions when something has happened that can only be described as 'divine healing.' On each of these occasions the person prayed for has later told me that they knew they had been healed. A couple of them described it as being like an electric shock that ran from the top of their head to the tip of their feet. I guess that's what this woman had felt when she touched Jesus' garment.

It was then that her healing was made complete as Jesus lifted her to her feet and gently said to her; *"Daughter, your faith has healed you. Go in peace and be freed from your suffering."* In those words we have a message that each of us desperately needs to hear. For there is hardly a person among us who, in one way or another, doesn't feel a bit like that woman felt. We carry around within us secrets that we would sooner die than have made known; feelings about our own unworthiness - uncleanness even. Yet something within us says that if only we could touch Jesus in some special way - or have him touch us - everything would be different. And the truth is - we can.

The real significance of this story is not whether Jesus actually touched her, or whether she touched Jesus. The real significance is the faith within her; which is why Jesus said to her; *"Your faith has healed you. Go in peace."* I don't know what image forms in your mind when you think or dream about Jesus touching your life. Perhaps you imagine some kind of dramatic experience that will zap you off your feet; or some sort of personal transformation that will make you feel worthy of God. Both of these probably seem like futile hopes: But the good news is that all Jesus looks for is faith - that simple, childlike trust that says, *"Lord, I can't do it, but I know that you can."*

We don't have Jesus' robe here to touch, or the Holy Grail or even a piece of the true Cross. And don't need those things - not when we have Jesus himself. What we do need is faith in his word that *"Where two or three are gathered together in his name, he is in the midst of them."* Our equivalent of that woman's touching of the hem of Jesus' garment is a simple prayer from our hearts to him that says; *Lord, I need you. Touch my life, forgive my sins and make me whole."*

True faith does not require that this should then be followed by a dramatic experience to reinforce it. True faith just carries on with life in the calm assurance that the Spirit and life of God is within us and, as we continue to live in that attitude of simple trust, will continue to grow within us until that day when we shall see him face to face and be changed into his likeness.

Father, grant us that simple faith that commits all our ways and all our days into your hands, knowing that your will is good and perfect, and that we are more than conquerors when we live in it. Amen.