

FAITH & GENEROSITY REFLECTION

Romans 4.13-end; Matthew 9.9-13, 18-26

By the Reverend Canon Professor Liz Stuart

It seems that one of the hardest things to genuinely believe in and live out of is the abundant generosity of God as revealed in the life and teaching of Jesus. It can feel just too good to be true, for us and also for others, so we function as if there is what the theologian Jarel Robinson-Brown has called a 'famine of grace', rather than an abundance of grace flowing from God.

St Paul found his ministry challenged and undermined by this famine mentality. The expectation that 'in the days to come' Gentiles would come to worship God was an ancient one (Isaiah 2.2). Paul believed that those days had arrived with Christ. He was called to preach that good news to the Gentiles, but some fellow followers of Jesus took the view that this could only happen if those Gentiles first became Jews. After all, Abraham, the father of a multitude of nations through whom all nations were to be blessed, was circumcised.

In today's reading from Romans, Paul presents his response to that argument, pointing out that God's promise was made to Abraham before he was circumcised and it was Abraham's belief in God's promise of plenty, despite the evidence of Sarah's barrenness and his own agedness, that meant his faith 'was reckoned to him as righteousness'. The great scholar of St Paul, E.P. Saunders, has pointed out that in Paul's writings the phrases 'reckoned as righteousness' and 'righteoused by faith' mean something quite different to their normal, judicial use where they meant to be declared innocent. Saunders argues that Paul uses

these words not judicially but to convey the transference from one state to another, from an old to a new way of being in Christ¹. Paul's contention was that God's promise of that grace of transference predated the giving of the Law and was not dependent upon it. Therefore, Gentiles had equal access to the salvation wrought by Christ. Over two thousand years later Paul's argument is familiar and obvious to us, but it was not to a goodly number of early followers of Jesus, including some who had been close to him. Those of us who are Gentile Christians might occasionally pause to thank God for his generosity in including us and also thank God for inspiring St Paul to argue his case and cause in such a compelling and careful manner so that his argument of abundance won the day over the famine mentality.

Paul writes that Abraham 'hoped against hope' that God's promise to him was true. In today's Gospel reading we are told of three other people who hoped against hope and experienced God's abundant grace. It is hard to imagine how hated tax collectors were in Jesus' day. Working for the occupying force was bad enough but tax collectors were also known for exploiting their position, charging extra from their own people, and pocketing it. They would have been avoided, excluded and despised. Matthew may have been so surprised that one of his fellow countrymen even spoke to him, never mind issued an invitation to go with him, that out of the misery of his isolation he just gets up and follows Jesus. And where he is led by Jesus is to a meal, a place of conversation, of belonging and inclusion. The Pharisees speak for us because all of us think at some time or other that there must be limits to God's grace. Paradoxically, in failing to appreciate that we have benefitted as much as others from God's outrageous generosity, we put ourselves on the edges, sniping and bitter, thereby depriving ourselves of the enjoyment of the meal and the company of our Lord. Jesus invites us in but to cross the threshold involves us recognising that we are as unworthy as the others who gather around the table of transformation.

The woman with the haemorrhages is at the end of her tether. Any woman who has suffered from gynaecological problems will know something of the pain, discomfort and

¹ E.P. Sanders, *Paul, The Law and the Jewish People* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983)

indignity that this woman will have gone through and empathise with her desire not to have to explain her symptoms one more time or subject herself to the examination of another man in her desperation for it to be over. She hopes against hope that just touching the tassels of his garments will be enough. Jesus gets it. He addresses her with enormous tenderness as 'daughter' and makes her well.

Perhaps he spoke with such tenderness because he was conscious that he was on the way to another daughter. The despair of death can seem unmercifully absolute but in that bleakest of places, a father clutches at a ray of hope by throwing himself down before Jesus. Jesus dismisses the ministers of death whose noise could not wake the dead and offers the woman a hand, pulling her out of death as he will later pull Peter out of the waves.

From these stories we learn that faith is rarely heroic or carefully thought out. In all three cases faith emerges from despair and wretched longing, a place of famine. Jesus responds to that authentic craving for God's promises to be realised by transferring people from one state to another. Matthew is moved from a state of exclusion to inclusion, the woman is transformed from the state of sickness to wellness, and the daughter is pulled from death back to life. The three movements represent different aspects of the salvation Jesus brings - belonging, wellness, and life in all its fullness and without end. The fact that this salvation is available to all, Jew and Gentile, is something we now take for granted but in doing so we risk failing to appreciate the breathtaking generosity of God. As individuals and as Church we need to live and move and proclaim the abundance of our God with joyful gratitude.