

Talk for Opening the Door Conference

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Bromley

On his return, Jesus was welcomed by a crowd. They were all there expecting him. A man came up, Jairus by name. He was president of the meeting place. He fell at Jesus' feet and begged him to come to his home because his twelve-year-old daughter, his only child, was dying. Jesus went with him, making his way through the pushing, jostling crowd. In the crowd that day there was a woman who for twelve years had been afflicted with hemorrhages. She had spent every penny she had on doctors but not one had been able to help her. She slipped in from behind and touched the edge of Jesus' robe. At that very moment her hemorrhaging stopped. Jesus said, "Who touched me?" When no one stepped forward, Peter said, "But Master, we've got crowds of people on our hands. Dozens have touched you." Jesus insisted, "Someone touched me. I felt power discharging from me." When the woman realized that she couldn't remain hidden, she knelt trembling before him. In front of all the people, she blurted out her story--why she touched him and how at that same moment she was healed. Jesus said, "Daughter, you took a risk trusting me, and now you're healed and whole. Live well, live blessed!" While he was still talking, someone from the leader's house came up and told him, "Your daughter died. No need now to bother the Teacher." Jesus overheard and said, "Don't be upset. Just trust me and everything will be all right." Going into the house, he wouldn't let anyone enter with him except Peter, John, James, and the child's parents. Everyone was crying and carrying on over her. Jesus said, "Don't cry. She didn't die; she's sleeping." They laughed at him. They knew she was dead. Then Jesus, gripping her hand, called, "My dear child, get up." She was up in an instant, up and breathing again! He told them to give her something to eat. Her parents were ecstatic, but Jesus warned them to keep quiet. "Don't tell a soul what happened in this room."

(Luke 8:40-56; The Message)

Hamid turned his angry, tired, tearful eyes to me and asked through his interpreter – “Could you please provide a *ta^cwidh* for me?” “An amulet?” I replied. “No! But I can certainly pray in the name of Jesus Christ for your daughter to be found and restored to you.” Hamid's 17-year old daughter Saida had not returned home from school one day in mid-December 2006. [I've changed all names here deliberately] The police, social services, school senior management team were already involved. Now some Muslims had brought Hamid to meet me, as local vicar, to see if I could help. I knew Hamid's friends from earlier encounters over the years. The circumstances surrounding Hamid's daughter going missing proved to be a minefield. The cultural distance between affronted and ashamed Afghan father and by-the-rules British police force was huge. I could certainly appreciate something of Hamid's anxiety as a parent – I too have had teenage daughters who do impulsive things. At the same time, staff at the school that Saida attended suspected major difficulties at home in Hamid's treatment of his daughter. Apart from listening and attempting some interpretation of cultural difference, what I could really offer was a suggestion that power for the tense situation lay not in amulets or talismans but in Jesus Christ. I could stand and pray with Hamid and his friends. We did so, on the street and within my church. Over to you Lord. What will you do with this invitation to involvement in a needy Muslim's life? The situation is ongoing.

This kind of encounter with Muslims reminds me of Jesus' involvement in the lives of two females early in his public ministry (Luke 8:40-56). One of those females was 12 years old, the beloved and only daughter of Jairus, ruler of a local synagogue – and she was dying. The other female was an older woman, twelve years ill with a contamination that closed down her family and friends and social life – twelve years “living death” is what she has known. The father of the dying girl, the synagogue ruler, sought out Jesus – why? Because he was convinced that Jesus was the Messiah? I don't think so.

Because he believed that Jesus was the Saviour of humankind? I don't think so. Because he thought that Jesus might be able to heal his daughter? I think so. The twelve years contaminated woman dared touch Jesus from behind, camouflaged by the crowd – why? Because she was convinced that Jesus was the Messiah? I don't think so. Because she believed that Jesus was the Saviour of humankind? I don't think so. Because she thought that Jesus might be able to heal her? I think so.

Muslims in the end are ordinary people, like you and me, like this woman and this child. The vast majority of Muslims are very ordinary people, like you and me, like this woman and this child. Even those convinced Islamists who are prepared to engage in acts that terrorise others are at heart no less human than the rest of us. After all, by Jesus' standard a Christian brother who is angry with another Christian brother runs the risk of finding himself a murderer at heart:

“You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, ‘Do not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.’ But I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment.”

(Matthew 5:21-22)

Does anyone here admit to having been brought face to face with the murderer that lurks in his or her heart? We are all capable of pretty murderous attitudes, if not murderous actions. Muslims – in this country or in Iraq or in Afghanistan – are ordinary people. They are not especially evil. They do not have especially hard hearts. They are like you and me – made in the divine image, contaminated by sin and helpless to save themselves. Some of them, we may be sure, are open to God. Some of them, we may be sure, are prepared to approach Jesus in their need. Some of them, we may be sure, are ready to be introduced to Jesus through the likes of us. We may be sure because they are like us, because they are like these two females of Jesus' own day.

A person's initial encounter with Jesus may not be very theologically informed. It may involve a lot of false presuppositions about who Jesus is. Spiritually, it might be very inadequate. Think for a moment about that woman with the hemorrhage problem. The story of her approach to Jesus shouts “magic” doesn't it? “She came up behind him and touched the edge of his cloak, and immediately her bleeding stopped” (v 44). Unseen, behind Jesus' back, touching just the periphery of his outer garment (maybe a tassel) – and what the doctors had been unable to achieve over many years was accomplished in an instant: “her bleeding stopped.” That's as close to correct theology that it took for the woman's life to begin to be transformed. No one else knew what had happened except the woman. “It's over at last!” she thinks. Except that for Jesus it's not over! He also knew! “Who touched me?” he demands. Touch the periphery and you touch him. Unseen, behind his back, edge of his cloak, maybe – but you are touching him. And it's not magic. “Power” was drawn out of him. Something of Jesus himself left him to transform this woman's life and Jesus “knew it”. So now the trembling woman is invited to make public confession of where she was and what she has become. In the process she discovers herself as “daughter” in Jesus' eyes – as precious to him as the twelve-year old daughter is to Jairus. The woman's faith in Jesus has led to physical healing and social restoration – she may go in peace, in wholeness, in confidence. From behind Jesus to before him; from vague *baraka* or *mana* or “blessing” search to “daughter” of Jesus; from magical manipulation to faith.

With such a story from the Gospels, it seems to me, we need to begin when we think about Islam or Muslims in our world today. It's not a very easy beginning place to get to. Media images mislead us and sadly some Christian perspectives encourage us only to see the contamination, the anti-social aggressiveness, the reluctance to integrate, the willingness to terrorise of some members of the Muslim community. Allow me to make the following suggestion to you. In our country, when we think “Buddhism”, we think the Dalai Lama; when we think “Hinduism”, we think yoga or *diwali*; when we think “Sikhism”, we think turbans instead of police helmets; when we think “Islam”, we think Muslims terrorist or we think the veil. Don't we? Loud, negative, emotive pictures and voices distract us from discerning Muslims as ordinary people in our midst – ordinary people struggling with issues equivalent to those with which we struggle and with which Jairus and the twelve years sick woman struggled.

We really need to begin with such an incident from the Gospel records. My conviction is that Jesus is just as accepting today of approaches to him by Muslims who maybe don't have all the right theology

about who he is. Jesus is just as willing today for “power” to be drawn from himself by needy, anonymous Muslims as by anyone else. Jesus Christ is just as happy today to become the focus of trust for people, Muslims, who know their need and turn to him as he ever was. If in seeing Jesus we can say that we have seen the Father, if Jesus is the “icon” of the Father in heaven, then we can be absolutely certain today that God has a heart for Muslims. God does not hate Muslims. He does not see them as “the enemy”! He loves them!

If that is a difficult-enough place for us to get to begin, it is equally a hard place from which to get to proceed. For I need to say as well that the Jesus Christ who loves Muslims is not the Jesus Christ that Muslims have made him to be. He is not the Jesus Christ of the Qur’ân – or at least, the image found of Jesus there constitutes only a starting-point, not a finishing-point, for describing who he is. He is probably not the Jesus Christ of most of our Christian profession either – do we Christians honestly know and represent the real Jesus? Or is it rather that we who call ourselves followers of Jesus have managed, by the grace of God, to make a little start along the road towards knowing him – thanks, not to ourselves, but to the Spirit of God? Remember Paul’s salutary words: “For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith – and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God” (Ephesians 2:8). Grace and faith, both “givens”, not originating with us at all. Anyway, my point is that Jesus Christ is Jesus Christ untamed – untamed by what the Qur’ân might or might not say, untamed by how we Christians might or might not live. Jesus Christ is God! He is divine!

Back to our Gospel incidents. With the suddenly-not-bleeding woman, who is it that can address such an older woman as “Daughter”? In a hierarchical society, the normal, polite form of address would be “Mother” or “Aunt” or at least “Sister”. So what status for Jesus is being implied through that single word, “Daughter”? How dare this younger male speak “down” to an older woman – except that this is no ordinary younger male? There is something about Jesus, underlined by the healing that has occurred in the woman’s body, that makes it perfectly acceptable for him to speak “down” with authority to her. Society’s norms are being turned on their head here in acknowledgement that Jesus Christ is Jesus Christ untamed.

With Jairus’ daughter, the point is more strongly made. The message comes from Jairus’ house that the man’s child has died; so “Don’t bother the teacher any more”. Such careful, polite words betray the starkly human perception of Jesus that has been driving this prolonged encounter between Jairus and Jesus. Jesus is rabbi, respected teacher, special religious man, but that is all – so don’t vex him, don’t annoy him, don’t trouble him further. Jesus is teacher, Jesus is prophet, Jesus is moral or ethical icon, but that is all. Many Muslims, and others, would agree with such an assessment. But such an assessment of Jesus is inadequate. It is untrue if that is all the truth that it is allowing. For Jesus is more than human, and he is willing to leave his divine signature in this situation also if only Jairus will agree: “Don’t be afraid, just believe, and she will be healed” (v 50). Some while later, alone in the house with Jairus and wife, Peter, James and John, and a lifeless child corpse – while many others wail and mourn and dismiss the nutty teacher with scorn – Jesus leaves his divine signature in a series of imperatives: “Stop wailing”, “My child, get up!” “Give her something to eat”, “Don’t tell anyone what’s gone on here.” Divine imperatives. God commanding. Once again, it is the young man in the hierarchical structure daring to speak “down”, against the norm. Why? Because he is more than a man. He is divine!

We have gathered here this morning for an “opening the door on Islam” day. Why? Well, ultimately because this same Jesus Christ, after his death, burial and resurrection, authorised the “Great Commission”. He gathered his disciples around him and spoke “down” to them with the authorisation of God the Father: “All authority in heaven and earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations...” (Matthew 28:18-19). Think about the context in which Jesus dared to speak so uncompromisingly. Jesus was insisting, in the religiously plural world of his day, that the whole globe was to become the focus of his disciples’ mission: go to all peoples, all languages, all ethnicities. Just because we live in a religiously plural world does not mean that we have to renegotiate Jesus’ claim to universality: according to him, his Father sent him because his Father loved the whole world (John 3:16). Indeed, we might take inspiration from the fact that the exclusive claims of Jesus Christ were first voiced in a world of plural religious allegiances. Our post-modern, Western culture is very suspicious of truth-claims or overarching stories that purport to be relevant to every person, everywhere. It believes in private, personal truth and in individual mini-stories: what is “true for me today” is what matters. The

important thing, it avows, is not to show intolerance of anyone else's personal truth and mini-story. Sorry, Western culture! Both Islam and Christianity know a prior claim from on high. Muslims today continue to be very motivated to live out the requirements of that higher claim according to their interpretations of it – and there are many different interpretations of it. Amongst us Christians, it is largely in the hands of our brothers and sisters from the global south that serious obedience to the universal claims of Christ now seems to rest. Such sisters and brothers have not yet been seduced by secular humanism, by post-modern suspicion of claims to absolute authenticity. The weight of faithfulness and obedience to Christ has increasingly come to lie with such brothers and sisters. In their vivacious and costly witness, it seems to me, is invested most of the hope for the eternal destiny of most people in the world today. Can we emulate our brothers and sisters from the global south in seeking to be faithful here, however much going “against the flow” that may require of us with respect to our context in the United Kingdom? At the same time, I need to mention that with such motivated vision and discipleship as is displayed by our brothers and sisters from the global south, there needs sometimes to be heeded the delicate challenge of not becoming stridently uncompassionate or triumphalist, especially towards Islam or Muslims. We do not need to demonise, to marginalise, to be seduced into an Islamophobic stereotyping of Muslims and their faith. For us in the Western church, maybe we have forsworn some of the triumphalism prevalent in parts of the world church, but we have mostly lost our nerve in remaining faithful to the unique Christ of the Gospels. And we have often agreed with our secular humanist culture in denigrating Islam, or in viewing it only as a hotbed of terrorists. We really do need each other in the global household of God if faithful obedience to the will of Jesus is to live alongside a radical transformation within us toward Christlikeness.

A pattern clearly emerges in this passage from Luke's Gospel that we have been considering. It begins with a crowd welcoming Jesus (v 40). Today, we never know where Jesus might receive a welcome. Certainly within Islam, and certainly within its source-text, there is a positive view of Jesus despite the fact that we often only get to hear about Muslim denials of some of our core beliefs about Jesus Christ. Jesus is special, according to the Qur'ân. He is sinless, he is healer, he is miracle-worker, he is raiser of the dead, he is alive – even if that is understood in pre-crucifixion withdrawal to heaven. Within Islam, there is a welcoming of Jesus.

The Gospel text continues with an appeal (or two appeals actually) being made to Jesus. In many Muslim lives there is appeal to Jesus already going on. You only have to think of well-known Muslim background believers like Bilquis Sheik or Gulshan Esther or listen to those who have been alongside Muslims who have become followers of Jesus to know that “appealing to Jesus” does go on in Muslim hearts and lives.

In the Gospel text, Jesus quickly responds to human appeals to himself. What is more, he responds positively. It doesn't matter who the person is – someone at the centre of his religious community with status in society like Jairus or someone on the margins who has no one to speak for her like the older woman. It doesn't matter how private or long-term or painful or sudden or mortal the problem may be that pushes a person to seek out Jesus – he is willing to go with them, to allow life to be drawn out of him.

In the Gospel text, neither incident ends at this point, with the appeal being generously met by Jesus. The Gospel incidents end, not with the “happily ever after” of the human protagonists, but with an unveiling of who Jesus really is. Who Jesus is for them, who he is for those in their communities, and who he is for people like ourselves down through the ages who read the record of what was once dramatically witnessed: the giver of new life to new “daughter”; the author of divine imperatives in the face of death. The Lord! Here is the highlight and end-point of the Gospel stories. Here is where you get to if you really open up to God's heart. What is it that God is looking for from his side in an encounter with needy humanity? He is looking for human beings to come to agree with him on who Jesus really is. Against the norms of society. Against the hierarchical stereotypes of first century Palestine. Against the liberal universalism of post-modern, Western cultures. Against the limiting prescriptions of the Qur'ân. Against the limiting faithlessness of followers of Jesus like ourselves. Coming to agree on who Jesus really is. That is the goal of the Gospel incidents. That is the goal for our lives. That is the goal for Muslims. That is the goal for secular humanists. That is the goal for the world. That is the goal on God's heart.

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