

## Reading Luke 8:41-end

I wonder if any of you can remember your nightmares? Perhaps you don't want to! But I once had a nightmare which scared me so much I can still remember it forty years later. In my dream, we were being chased by monsters. Horribly scary monsters that looked like Chewbacca gone bad. And if they touched you, you turned into a monster too. It was the scariest game of tag ever. In my dream, I remember trying to run away from these monsters and climb away from these monsters. It was impossible. Finally, all my friends and family made a giant pyramid with me as far away from the monsters as I could be, right at the very top. But of course, the monsters touched the people at the bottom, who became monsters and they touched the next row up, who became monsters, who touched the next row...

At that point, realising there was no escape, I woke up!

Why am I telling you this story? Well, it illustrates something important that we need to understand about our Gospel reading today. Thousands of years ago, long before Jesus walked the earth, the early Israelite people were given a series of commandments to obey. Some were spiritual about worshipping and honouring God. Some were ethical, about how we treat one another, and especially the weaker members of our society. And some were very practical and designed to keep the community healthy and safe.

The Book of Leviticus in places reads like an early public health handbook. How to manage mould. What to do about someone who has a rash. In an age long before germ theory, these were remarkable bits of wisdom. Some historians think that the hygiene rules that Jewish people followed are one the reasons their communities were less impacted by pandemics like the Black Death.

These observances were rules designed to help. But over time they had become rules that hurt. By Jesus' time, there were rules about what was clean and what was not clean – and unclean things were excluded. It wasn't just things that were unclean like mouldy walls, but people too. Women on their period or who had just given birth – not clean. Dead bodies – not clean. And if you touched someone unclean, you became unclean and were excluded too.

Religious people went to great lengths to avoid becoming unclean. But that meant avoiding hurting people – people like this woman, who because of her bleeding had been excluded from her community for twelve years; people like this family who had lost their child. A little bit like my dream of being touched by a monster and becoming one, they feared being touched by something unclean and becoming unclean too.

Today, we might not have these same beliefs but we may sometimes act in similar ways. How many of us avoid people who are suffering or struggling in case their misfortune is catching? We don't want to be infected by their bad luck or bad mood. And so we exclude them and cause them further pain.

The thing is that Jesus was different – and remarkably the sick woman had realised this. She knew that Jesus was not going to be contaminated by her uncleanness. Rather

everything he touched became clean, became good, became whole. If only I touch even the hem of his coat, I'll be healed. That was the radical faith Jesus commended: not only that he might heal her situation, but she recognised someone so good that all our failings and uncleannesses could never contaminate him. But perhaps, simply by being close to him, we might become good ourselves. To return to my nightmare, when we touch Jesus, he doesn't become a monster. But when he touches us by his Spirit, perhaps the monstrous bits of us are made better.

What does this mean practically? Well, on an individual level, it reminds us that no one is too bad, too unclean – or as we might say today, too messed up – to approach Jesus and ask him into their life. You won't spoil him. He will make you good. As our beautiful introit reminded us today, he can cleanse us and fill us with light.

At a community level, it reminds us to be careful of people who use the Christian faith to divide and exclude. Of course, we will have disagreements about issues – we are human beings after all – but as human beings we belong to one another. Resist anyone who sees difference as an uncleanness, as away of making another person less valuable, as someone to be avoided and excluded.

A little over a year ago, I was a peace chaplain in Nuneaton for the inaugural "Britain First" march. It was an interesting experience listening to both protestors and counter-protestors. One thing that did upset me was that when the march began, they walked behind someone holding a big white cross. And we have seen this repeated in recent rallies in London – people using Christian symbols to protest the growing diversity of our country. It is almost as if they think our Britishness and our Christian heritage are being contaminated – made unclean – by difference.

Now there are important conversations to be had about how we support good community relations and care for sectors of our society who have been neglected and left behind. But in suggesting difference is an attack on Christianity, the protestors have got things badly wrong. Christianity is never made less by encounters with others. Christianity does not need protecting by excluding others. Rather Christianity invites us to embrace those who are regarded as other and in that encounter – like the parents of the girl in our story – to be astounded at the goodness of God.

So let us not be so worried about monsters that we become them ourselves. Let us, like the unnamed woman, have faith in the absolute goodness of Christ – for ourselves and for our world.

Prayer for our country: Revd Dr Inderjit Bhogal

Holy God,  
our refuge In whom is our sanctuary,  
We pray for all people and places caught up in hate filled violent street disorder.  
We hold before you all who perpetrate violence,  
All who live in fear of violence,  
All who work to bring violence to an end.

We hold before you all who mourn the loss of life and livelihood resulting from violence.  
Bring us and the world to always build cultures and communities  
of humanity, hospitality, healing and hope,  
where all are welcome, valued, belong equally, and have sanctuary and well-being.  
Strengthen us to work with you to bring people together  
to stand with all who are targets of hatred,  
to dispel misinformation, hatred and fear,  
to mend hurts, to keep hope alive, to make all things new,  
and never to tire of seeking justice and peace.

Amen