

HOMILY SUNDAY 13 – B (Homily 02)

“Unconditional Faith”

(Wis 1:13-15, 2:23-24; 2 Cor 8:7, 9, 13-15; Mark 5:21-43)

How strong is your faith? Is it strong enough to cope with unanswered prayer?

The gospel today invites us to pray for unconditional faith, the faith of someone like Jairus.

We might instinctively respond to this message with a question – what is unconditional faith? The expression “unconditional love” is more familiar and easily understood. But unconditional faith – what is that?

May I suggest that the faith of Jairus in the gospel today is precisely that unconditional faith that keeps on believing no matter what?

There was a country song some years back that can shed some light on this term. In it the singer looks back over his life and thanks God for unanswered prayer. Well into adulthood, he can now see in hindsight that as a youth he prayed for what he wanted, but God knew what he needed and did not grant his prayer. And now he can see with gratitude that God knew best, so he is able to thank God for unanswered prayer.

Jairus in the gospel can teach us a deep lesson about unconditional faith. Let us walk through the gospel story from his point of view. First, he is in desperate straights. His beloved daughter is dying. He is a religious man, a leader of the synagogue, a man of faith in God. He has heard about Jesus and his power to heal. He puts his faith in Jesus, comes to him and prays to Jesus to come and heal his daughter. How delighted he must have been as Jesus complies and goes with him towards his house to heal his daughter.

Then suddenly there is an interruption. A woman who also is in desperate straights, who has been sick as many years as Jairus’ daughter is old, who had spent all her resources trying to get well, comes forward. She also has faith in Jesus’ power to heal, touches his cloak and is made well. Jesus stops, turns and demands to know who touched him.

Can you imagine what Jairus would be going through? He must have thought, how dare this woman interfere on his mission to get Jesus to heal his daughter? This woman had been sick forever, whereas his daughter was dying. Not only that, after the woman was healed, Jesus seems to lose his focus, gets distracted and wants to know who in this crowd touched him. Jairus must have been almost beside himself, yet he stood by, believing still though he did not understand the delay.

Jesus then elicits a confession out of the woman, and affirms her faith. It is like he intentionally interrupts his urgent mission to heal a dying girl, so that he could say to this woman that it was her faith that healed her. He wanted to underline the role of her faith to the point of sounding like it was her faith in Him, and not his own power, that healed the woman of the disease that had rendered her unclean for twelve long years. He wants us to have that kind of faith.

There is more to this miracle story. In the Jewish religion, it was forbidden to touch someone who was passing blood. That would make a person unclean. That poor woman had been an outcast among her own people for twelve years, because she was ritually unclean. Yet Jesus makes a point of asking who touched him. The healing happened through a touch that went beyond the Jewish religious regulations of cleanliness. Jesus was, in passing, redefining their image of God. God was not a legalistic accountant concerned with religious rules of cleanliness. God was a compassionate merciful healing lover who cared for people and reached out to heal them, to make them whole.

Jairus had the faith to stand by while all this happened. And then the worst case scenario burst upon him. The delay, the unanswered prayer, had cost him the life of his daughter. He was informed that she had died and that he should let Jesus go on his way, for it was too late.

A simple comment from Jesus, "Do not fear, only believe," was all it took to restore his shaken faith: Not just restore his faith, but deepen it. Now he had to believe that Jesus could not only have healed his daughter, but could now restore her life. His prayer now was not just for healing, but for resuscitation of her life. His faith had grown and was deeper than ever. It had become unconditional faith, even in the face of the unbelief and scoffing his own friends and relatives displayed when Jesus arrived.

Still believing, he went into the room where his daughter lay dead, along with his wife and the disciples of Jesus. And there, he witnessed the raising of his daughter back to life by Jesus, who simply suggests that they give her something to eat.

We are taught by this gospel incident to have the faith of Jairus, unconditional faith. This incident is a prelude to a later similar scene in the gospel of John, the resuscitation of Lazarus. Where the raising of Jairus' daughter, to a modern mind, might be a case of "beyond and back" or clinical death, the raising of Lazarus is definitely not. There Jesus waits four days before responding to the plea of Martha and Mary to come and heal their brother. On arriving, he is told that Lazarus was dead four days already. Both incidents however, focus on faith in Jesus as the Son of God who would overcome the power of death and give those who believe in him new life, eternal life.

The question that we must ask ourselves today is how do we handle the impossible situations in our lives? They are many and come at us from all sides, day after day. Sickness, mental illness, family divisions that go on for generations, not to mention problems of war, racism, poverty, corruption, divisions in the Church, etc., are situations that we face every day.

The first reading, taken from the book of Wisdom, addresses the issue of evil, suffering and death present in a world created by a God who is good. The author reminds us that God is good, that creation is good, that God's love is a generative force for good, that we were created for immortality. It explains that evil came into the world through the devil's envy. We know, of course, that this insight from Wisdom is a simplistic answer that really does not answer the problem, because one can always ask, where the devil came from if creation was good. Theologians and scholars have struggled for centuries with this problem of evil.

The best answer I have heard came from Dr. Hadjiantonio, a Greek professor of Patristics who told us that the best answer is to save ourselves a lot of time and energy, and just accept that the question is a mystery that we have to live with.

The other part of the answer to that question is in the gospel today. We are invited to have unconditional faith in Jesus, to put our total trust in him, that

in the end he will make sense of every unanswered question, and every unanswered prayer in our lives.

The important thing is that we have the faith of the woman suffering from a haemorrhage and touch the clothes of Jesus. The important thing is that we especially have the faith of Jairus, who continued to believe even in the face of unanswered prayer, and witnessed the raising of his daughter to life. Our challenge is to go one step further, and believe that Jesus can, even today, right here and now, give us a share in eternal life, in the peace, joy and justice of the Holy Spirit that is the reign of God in the world today.

Recently, I attended the Caritas banquet in Winnipeg. It is a fund raising event put on by the Knights of Columbus to raise funds that are then given to needy charitable projects around the province of Manitoba. Each year they give an award to a recipient or a group who are doing exceptional charitable work. This year the award was given to the L'Arche Homes for the mentally challenged. They had invited Jean Vanier, the founder of the movement, to come and he responded with a message. Vanier, to my mind, is someone who has unconditional faith in Jesus. That faith allows him to see Jesus especially in the simple ones, the lowly ones of our society who are often dismissed and marginalized.

Vanier's faith in Jesus has enabled him to help countless others share his vision and also find Jesus in the poorest of the poor. He has inspired many to not just work for the mentally challenged, but to live with them in communities of unconditional love, affirmation and acceptance that help them all grow in peace, joy, freedom and purposeful lives.

The Eucharist that we celebrate today is itself a tremendous act of faith. We believe that Jesus is truly present in his Word and in the consecrated bread and wine. He touches us with his love, forgives and heals us, and empowers us to go out and spread the good news of his unconditional love with unconditional faith.

So as we celebrate today let us pray for the unconditional faith of Jairus that will empower us to reach out with the unconditional love of Jean Vanier. May God bless us all.