

[that you might] walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, ... bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God... Colossians 1:10 (ESV; alt.)

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It was a remarkable record. A kind of family timeline. Decade upon decade captured in dozens of tiny marks on an old door frame. Each mark carefully recorded with a name and a date. Starting very near the bottom, just a couple of feet off the floor, and extending all the way to the top of the door frame, and beyond. Each mark a record of growth; another year older; another year taller. Daughters and sons. Granddaughters and grandsons. Great grandchildren as well! Faithfully, lovingly, measured and marked as each year passed. Year after year; decade after decade. A record so treasured that, when the old home was sold and the last of the family moved away, that piece of the old door frame was carefully, lovingly, removed. So that it might be carried to their new home. Where it continues to mark both the passage of time and the passage of life; a record not just of the growth that comes with age but the growth that comes with a family's love.

Maybe your family kept a record like that. A way of measuring where you were; a way of measuring how far you'd come. But there are all kinds of ways in which our lives can be measured. If you're a student, you know about tests and exams. Or perhaps you work for an employer who sets annual targets and goals. And some are forced to measure blood sugar or blood pressure to make sure that everything's ok.

How far have you come? And how far do you need to go?

This week's lessons from Holy Scripture are intended to be used as a kind of measuring stick: a way of assessing where we are. Not how tall we are. Not how smart we are; or how rich or healthy we are. But rather, how much have we grown into the image of the incarnate, crucified, resurrected, and ascended Christ. That's what the last six months have been all about. Growing more fully, growing more completely, into the image of the incarnate, crucified, resurrected, and ascended Christ; growing more fully, more completely, into the image of the compassionate, merciful, life-giving Christ who has called us into relationship with him. And as we stand right now at the very end of the Church Year we are being asked to measure where we are; to think about where we were when we started; and about how far we have come; and about how far we need to go.

That's why St. Paul speaks this morning about walking in a manner that pleases God, about bearing fruit and increasing in our knowledge of God. And that's why we hear Matthew's account of two remarkable healings: one of a woman who had suffered both physically and spiritually for far too long; the other of a young girl taken from her parents far too early and too young.

This week's Gospel comes at the end of a long series of bold dramatic signs; signs following Christ's Sermon on the Mount; signs that gave tangible proof to the radically different nature of the kingdom that he had spoken of. First, Jesus comes down from the hillside and is immediately confronted with a leper who seeks to be healed. Then he enters Capernaum and a centurion, a Roman soldier, a foreigner, an enemy, seeks him out because his servant is at home paralysed and he wishes Jesus to help him. Then Peter's mother-in-law lies sick with a fever; Jesus reaches out and touches her and she is made well. Then a great storm arises on the Sea of Galilee; and when the disciples are terrified for their lives, Jesus rebukes the winds and calms the sea. Jesus is then met by two men possessed by demons. He casts the demons out and they drive a herd of swine

into the sea. Then Jesus reaches out to a tax collector named Matthew and invites him to follow. Matthew accepts the call and Jesus joins Matthew and his equally unrespectable friends in a celebration. And, as we heard this morning, Jesus is interrupted by a leader in the synagogue whose daughter has just died. He agrees to go; but as He walks, surrounded by a great crowd, He is touched by a woman who has suffered from haemorrhaging for twelve years. She is healed and Jesus carries on, reaching the house of the synagogue ruler and raising the young girl back to life.

It is an amazing tour de force; the kind of thing that, if you read it at one go, comes at you with a kind of breathless intensity. And Matthew's order is no coincidence. He wants us to see how the kingdom that Christ spoke of on the mountain, a revolutionary Kingdom that turns upside down all of our earthly kingdoms; and challenges every one of our preconceptions: the kind of kingdom where the poor and the meek and the sorrowful are blessed; where his followers are commanded to turn the other cheek and even to love their enemies; [Matthew wants us to see how what Christ said about the revolutionary re-ordering of all human relationships] was immediately backed-up by what he did: proclamation backed-up by power. Because in all of these events Jesus is reaching out to the very people who were excluded from the Kingdom; the very people who were thought to be unworthy of God's Kingdom: the possessed and the diseased and women and lepers and sinners and tax collectors. So these dramatic moments were not just little tricks meant to impress the crowds. They were clear and concrete and unmistakable signs that the Kingdom of God had come. And that this kingdom was going to be radically different from all other kingdoms.

So, on one level, all of these bold dramatic signs speak of how Christ reaches out in our pain; of how He loves us so much that he takes that pain and isolation and brokenness on himself. That is the story summed up by the incarnation, crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension of the Christ that occupies our focus for the first half of the Church Year.

So, for example, the healing of a woman who had suffered physically from her illness and spiritually from the isolation of being perpetually unclean;¹ who was freed from her illness and given new life in her community, speaks of Christ's power to welcome us into the community of his Body, the Church; into a family larger than any of the challenged, broken, even unloving families that bring sorrow to our hearts. And the raising of a young girl back to life speaks not just of the promise of future resurrection for those who live in Christ but the way in which, for us, resurrection starts now. One restored to life; the other restored to community.

But these bold dramatic signs also remind us of what our responsibility is towards those who suffer; towards those who are left out; towards those who have been rejected; towards those for whom love and life have died. Reaching out to the lost and the frightened and broken and confused and giving them hope; reaching out to welcome the suffering and the rejected because Christ, in His compassion, has reached out to welcome us; is our focus for the second half of the Church Year – the Season of Trinity. And this week, before we start that journey all over again on the First Sunday in Advent, we are being asked to take stock; to measure how far we have come, how far we have grown. And how far we have yet to go.

¹ The bleeding described here has likely kept her from having children and that, in turn, was in the ancient world a social disgrace as well as a personal tragedy