

## Sermon - two faith stories, entwined

*Based on the reading: Mark 5.21-43*

### An intentional combination?

- Today I am going to focus exclusively on the Gospel story.
- To start with, the passage from Mark's account might appear to be two stories that have somehow become entwined, the story of the haemorrhaging woman interrupting the story of Jairus' daughter.
- It might even have been that they were indeed completely separate events originally, and in the oral tradition of the primitive gospel their retelling somehow became mixed together.
- Nevertheless, by the time Mark, as the author of the first written Gospel, compiled the oral stories into a single narrative, he was able to recognise the value of these two stories being combined like this.

### Part of the bigger narrative

- Last Sunday I provided the context for the story of the stilling of the storm, and it is pertinent to repeat some of that context again now.
- In chapter two, Jesus time and again shows his authority - over religious rules and regulations, and over sin.
- In chapter three we heard Jesus say that if Satan was a metaphorical strong man in charge of the world, then it would take a stronger man to bind the first, in order to claim the world for himself - the implication being that he, Jesus, was the stronger man, showing his authority over the prince of demons.
- Jesus followed this by stating that those who practise their faith in following God's will are his spiritual family, and thus members of the new kingdom he was establishing.
- In chapter four Jesus taught parables about the kingdom of God - all stories about seeds growing.
- These are parables about sowing and growing faith, and working faithfully with God.
- Jesus then calms the storm that occurs as he crosses the lake with the disciples, and chides them for their lack of faith.
- Arriving at the other side, he delivers the Gerasene demoniac, once again demonstrating his authority and power over the demonic forces.
- He then returns to engage in today's combination of stories about restoration to life anew.
- Jesus continually shows that he is the stronger man - stronger than the life-draining forces that are opposed to God's desire for the blessing and well-being of all.
- These stories are also of people demonstrating deep faith in Jesus, engaging with the divine power that he exercises.
- I will return to this aspect - the faith of Jairus and of the woman - in the last part of the sermon.

### The brackets of fertility

- For now I am going to focus on what Jesus highlights, and for this it is helpful to look at the girl and the woman, and how their stories connect.
- The Christian faith is often presented very much in the masculine paradigm, preferring imagery such as God the Father and quite unavoidably Jesus as the first-born son of Mary.
- We accept that for Jesus to have accomplished what he did in that world, in that time, he was necessarily male.
- While the Good News is equally applicable to women as well as men, it would appear that Jesus refrained from explicitly instructing women as women.
- That is, he seems to have avoided speaking down to women because they were women, and he seems to have avoided telling women how they should conduct themselves specifically as women - something that other men too often take it upon themselves to do.

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- I think you know what I am referring to, when too often it is primarily men who make the decisions about what women should or shouldn't do with regard to their dress, or education, or fertility, or life-choices.
- So how does Jesus, as a man, demonstrate that he sees and connects with women specifically as women, with the kinds of issues women face and men don't?
- For me, he demonstrates it in this story combination.
- Firstly, the woman who has been haemorrhaging for twelve years, is often assumed and described by scholars to have been suffering from ongoing menstrual problems.
- We are not given her age, so we don't know whether it was perhaps tied in with menopause, but this distinct possibility seems to fit because of the other part of the story.
- We are told that she has been suffering for twelve years.
- Co-incidentally, in an apparently offhand comment, Mark tells us that the girl was also twelve years old.
- That is, she was understood to have reached the age of menarchy, the stage in a young woman's life when she starts being fertile.
- Remember that a woman's fertility was a very big deal in that culture.
- A woman's value was primarily rated in terms of her fertility, her ability to produce children.
- Thus this story combination is a metaphor for two of the defining transition points of womanhood at that time - menarchy and menopause.
- And Jesus connects with these two representative women, and brings about, in both cases, radical transformation from despair and death, to hope and new life.
- In this I suggest that Jesus demonstrates that even though he is biologically a man, he acknowledges women in terms of where they are as women, and assures them of God's grace and blessing not only as human beings, but specifically as women.

### Making unclean - making clean

- The other part of what Jesus highlights here, is a continuation of all the stories showing his authority over sin, over demonic forces, over the things that drain life and well-being.
- Part of the code of conduct enshrined in the Jewish faith was the concept of ritual cleanliness and uncleanness.
- It might have had its origins in physical hygiene, but it developed into the idea of whether one was worthy enough to come into God's presence.
- This meant that before one could enter the temple to worship God, one needed to refrain from anything that might make one physically unhygienic - regardless of whether it was actual or only symbolic.
- It became understood that if one touched or encountered anything that was deemed unclean, one also became unclean by association.
- If you kept pigs, you were obviously unclean.
- If you touched diseased or leperous people, you would become unclean.
- If you went into the buildings of the unclean Gentiles, then that would make you unclean - which is why the Jews who collected taxes for the Romans were always unclean.
- If you were a menstruating woman, or came into close proximity of one, you were unclean.
- And if you touched a dead body, you became unclean.
- Jesus steps boldly into that status quo, and shows that when God's power is invoked, it is actually the reverse that occurs.

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- When he is touched by the haemorrhaging woman, he calls her out to show both her and everyone else that it is not himself who has been made unclean, but rather that the woman is now cleansed, and worthy to come into God's presence.
- In fact, it is because she was bold enough to come into God's presence, found in Jesus, that she was then made ritually worthy.
- And when Jesus touches the apparently dead girl, again it is not he that becomes unclean, but rather it is the girl who is restored to life.
- Jesus shows, once again, that he is the stronger man, and has power over anything that we assume prevents us from encountering God.

### A father with faith

- The final part I'm going to look at is the faith, both of Jairus and of the woman.
- Jairus, as a leader of a local synagogue, would have known of Jesus - would have known that Jesus presented as a maverick rabbi, who ran roughshod over religious regulations and seemed to be in opposition to religious leaders.
- As a synagogue leader, we can presume that he would not have approached Jesus.
- But he was also a father.
- Just as people might be opposed to supporting anyone they regard as unrighteous, except when it unexpectedly involves one's own children, so Jairus changed his tune when his daughter became deathly ill.
- This change was not a superficial one.
- Even after he is told that his daughter has died, he continues to place his faith in Jesus.
- He doesn't do this of his own accord - Jesus encourages him directly, saying: *'Do not fear - only believe.'* (Mark 5.36)
- When he gets to the house, Jesus turfs out all those who will not believe.
- He does not want their unbelief to interfere with his intent.
- Rather, he takes with him his closest disciples, and Jairus and his wife - all those who are wanting to engage their faith in what God is accomplishing through Jesus.
- And taking the girl by the hand, he speaks God's word in a simple command - *Talitha cum* - and she immediately rises from the bed, restored to life.
- Even in their faith the others are literally beside themselves in great amazement - the Greek word is *ekstasis* - which is the same word used at the end of the Gospel to describe the state of the women when they fled from the empty tomb at Easter.
- Mark does not relate the story of Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead, but has this story instead, showing Jesus' power over the grave, and over anything that we assume to be life-draining.

### A destitute woman with faith

- Like Jairus, the haemorrhaging woman is an unlikely, unexpected model of faith.
- Even though after twelve years she is both penniless and worse off, and even though she was risking overt ostracisation because her presence was theoretically making everyone unclean, both her desperation and her faith compelled her to physically reach out to Jesus:  
*'If I but touch his clothes, I will be made well.'* (Mark 5.28)
- This thought shows how profound her faith was, that she comprehended his divine power to be such that he didn't even need to speak to, or touch, her himself.
- And she was right - although Jesus then calls her out in order to complete the restoration.

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- She had been physically healed, but she also needed to be restored to her place in the community, and so Jesus lets both her and the community know that she is ritually clean and thus socially acceptable again.

*Jesus said to her, 'Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace, and be healed of your disease.' (Mark 5.34)*

- He names her '*Daughter*', as one who does the will of God, and is thus a member of the new kingdom.
- And Jesus acknowledges in her, faith's power to rescue people from forces opposed to God and reclaim them for the peace of God - the fullness of life associated with the new kingdom.

- To end, I will pray today's Collect again:

O Christ for whom we search,  
our help when help has failed:  
give us courage to expose our need  
and ask to be made whole,  
that, being touched by you,  
we may be raised to new life  
in the power of your name. Amen.