

Mark 5:21-43: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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Date: 07 April 2020

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[0 : 00] Mark chapter 5 verses 21 to 43. Who had had a discharge of blood for twelve years, and who had suffered much under many physicians, and had spent all that she had, and was no better, but rather grew worse.

She had heard the reports about Jesus, and came up behind him in the crowd, and touched his garment. For she said, If I touch even his garments, I will be made well. And immediately the flow of blood dried up, and she felt in her body that she was healed of her disease.

And Jesus, perceiving in himself that power had gone out from him, immediately turned about in the crowd, and said, Who touched my garments? And his disciples said to him, You see the crowds pressing around you, and yet you say, Who touched me?

And he looked around to see who had done it. But the woman, knowing what had happened to her, came in fear and trembling, and fell down before him and told him the whole truth. And he said to her, Daughter, your faith has made you well. Go in peace and be healed of your disease.

While he was still speaking, there came from the ruler's house some who said, Your daughter is dead. Why trouble the teacher any further? But overhearing what they said, Jesus said to the ruler of the synagogue, Do not fear, only believe.

[1 : 38] And he allowed no one to follow him except Peter and James and John, the brother of James. They came to the house of the ruler of the synagogue, and Jesus saw a commotion, people weeping and wailing loudly.

And when he had entered, he said to them, Why are you making a commotion and weeping? The child is not dead, but sleeping. And they laughed at him. But he put them all outside, and took the child's father and mother, and those who were with him, and went in where the child was.

Taking her by the hand, he said to her, Talathakumi, which means, Little girl, I say to you, arise.

And immediately the girl got up and began walking, for she was twelve years of age, and they were immediately overcome with amazement.

And he strictly charged them that no one should know this, and told them to give her something to eat. The end of Mark 5 relates two entangled events of healing. Both of the people being healed are women, and both of them are connected with twelve years.

The woman with the discharge of blood had suffered from it for twelve years, and the daughter of Jairus was twelve years of age. The passage begins with Jesus crossing back to the other side of the Sea of Galilee, after the events in the lands of the Gerasenes.

[2 : 47] Jairus was one of the rulers of the synagogue, who would have led services. That Jairus was the ruler of a synagogue also illumines the fact that opposition to Jesus among the religious leaders of Israel was far from total.

There were some among them who did look to Jesus as a great teacher, and one who was speaking the truth. Jairus' name is given to us, unlike the name of most people for whom Christ performed miracles or exorcisms.

Perhaps he was a figure who was known in the early church, or perhaps his name itself is important. Joel Marcus suggests that it might have been the Greek transliteration of names meaning either he enlightens or he awakens.

Either of those would be significant in the context. We also see a number of people in the Old Testament that might be a background here. A man called Jair the Manassite captured some of the area of Gilead in Numbers chapter 32 verse 41 and Deuteronomy 3 verse 14.

Another Jair was one of the judges in Judges chapter 10 verses 3 to 4. He operated in the same region, and Jairus seems to be in that same sort of region too.

[3 : 54] Jesus is requested to lay his hands on Jairus' daughter and heal her, and he goes with Jairus to his house. But on the way, he's thronged by the crowd, and there's a woman with a discharge of blood, presumably vaginal.

It seems to be a chronic hemorrhaging of blood, rather than just abnormally severe menstruation. And the effect of this would be to render her permanently unclean. It's probably one of the reasons why she approaches Jesus in the way that she did.

Had she been more open in her approach, she would probably not have been able to approach him at all. Many doctors had tried to help her, but had just increased her suffering, and also consumed all her resources.

So Jesus' healing contrasts with the failure of all the experts. She had heard about Jesus, and perhaps we should consider the fact that she was probably confined to the margins of society by her condition.

She was in many respects someone from an utterly different station in life from Jairus. She believes that if she were just to touch Jesus' garments, she would be healed. We see similar beliefs in chapter 6 verse 56, and then also in Acts 5 verse 15, where people wanted to be beneath the shadow of Peter as he walked by, and in Acts 19 verse 12, where people would take handkerchiefs or aprons that had touched the skin of Paul, and bring them to the sick so that they might be healed by them.

[5 : 14] The touch of the woman in this position would have been defiling, but not as defiling as touching someone's flesh. A defiled person had to wash themselves and wash their clothes, so it was both themselves, their body and their clothes that were defiled by the touch.

But here, there is a life that overcomes impurity, and that is transmitted to the woman, rather than the woman transmitting her impurity to Christ. This passage is also an illustration of the way in which clothes can function as an extension of a person, a way in which the clothes carry something of the significance and the power of the person.

Jesus inquires who touched him, to his disciples' amazement, because there is a crowd around, but Jesus recognises what has happened. In calling for the woman who had touched him to make herself known, the stage is set for an act of recognition, blessing and inclusion that completes the healing.

She will no longer be an isolated and marginalised individual, hiding herself in the crowd, but she will be one who is seen and addressed as daughter by her saviour. When the woman reveals herself, she comes in fear and trembling and falls down before him.

This is a response reminiscent of the way that people respond to appearances of God in scripture. She tells him everything, and Jesus blesses her, addresses her as daughter, and tells her that her faith has made her well.

[6 : 36] Faith here is not intellectual belief in some concepts or doctrines. It's a confident and a daring trust to come near to Christ. The prominence of faith in this story, as in that of Jairus and his daughter that follows, should be seen as related to the language of salvation that occurs in both.

The salvation in these stories seems to refer to physical healing and raising of the dead, in the case of Jairus' daughter. And the language of faith could be interpreted narrowly too.

However, Jesus routinely connects physical and spiritual senses of these things. Faith is a practical confidence to look to Jesus for deliverance, not just in spiritual matters.

And when it's exercised in physical matters, it is seen to have a spiritual connotation and significance too. Our tidy divisions between physical and spiritual can obstruct our understanding at such points.

Faith looks to Christ in whatever situation it finds itself in, even if it's physical difficulty. As in the story of Jairus' daughter that follows this, early Christian readers of this story probably figured themselves into the position of the woman with the discharge of blood, recognising her experience as a model for Christian experience more generally.

[7 : 52] We should do this too. Her being addressed as daughter at the end might also make the reader think of the new family that Jesus is forming around himself. However, all of this creates a delay, and by the time that Jesus reaches the house of Jairus, his daughter is dead.

The feared crisis has hit, and there might seem to be nothing more to be done. Jesus calls Jairus, however, to keep his confidence in his sufficiency for the situation.

There are many similarities to the story of Lazarus here, meeting the mourners, saying that the dead person is sleeping, delaying until the person is dead, etc. Jesus performs this miracle with only Peter, James and John of his disciples present.

They are privileged witnesses to his power. And saying that the daughter was sleeping would make people think of the final resurrection, where those sleeping in their graves would be awakened.

This is the language that we find in scripture and elsewhere. The dead sleeping and being awakened at the resurrection. However, the final resurrection was a long distant hope for the end of all things.

[8 : 54] It wasn't something that could really address the immediacy of the grief that people felt, or at least so they thought. However, Jesus can refer to death this way, because in him, the resurrection and the life had entered into Jairus' house.

Jesus takes the girl by the hand and addresses her, telling her to arise. And the use of Aramaic here, the fact that the original statement is preserved in its original language, gives the reader some sense of the immediacy of this powerful speech act.

These were not regular words, but words with a mysterious might. And they seem to be preserved for us in their original form for this reason. We see a similar thing in Mark 7, verse 34, where the word spoken to the man whose eyes were opened is also retained for us.

The reference to arising naturally, and I think appropriately, makes us think of the resurrection, and maybe giving her something to eat is also in part to make us think of later proofs of Jesus' own resurrection given in taking food, and not merely a reference to the girl's recovery of strength.

Jesus once again strictly instructs those present to keep the raising of the girl a secret, although his taking Peter, James, and John with him makes clear that he wanted the event to be witnessed and later spoken of openly.

[10 : 10] However, to tell it at that point in time, before Jesus' own resurrection had disclosed his true power over death, would be premature. That had to wait until after his own resurrection had taken place.

A question to consider. The woman with the issue of blood suffered with that condition for 12 years, and the daughter of Jairus was 12 years old.

Why does Mark record these details? What deeper significance to these healings might be suggested by them?