

Jairus' Daughter and the Woman with a Haemorrhage (A sermon preached in morning Chapel at Morling College, April 2009. Text: Mark 5:21-43).

Introduction

The question of why Mark commenced telling the story of Jairus' daughter, and interrupted it with the incident of the haemorrhaging woman, and then returned to complete the Jairus' daughter episode has always annoyed me. From our sophisticated 21st century perspective that is just not good story telling. I always suspected that Mark was attempting to provide a historically correct record of how it all *really* happened. But if that was the case, why did Matthew and Luke not fix it up and turn Mark's 'confused' or intertwined stories into the corrected separate stories about Jesus? On further reflection I began to wonder if all three synoptic Gospel writers saw these two incidents as part of one single, unified story, which in its entirety tells us something very important about Jesus.

I began to wonder what that message might be.

Jairus and his daughter

First we meet Jairus, a synagogue ruler in Galilee, a man of high standing in the Jewish community, and a leader in matters of religion and education. Then we discover that his only daughter was dying and there was nothing the doctors could do about it. Her situation was hopeless. She was twelve. Her parents had so many plans for her life. They expected that she would be betrothed (engaged) sometime in the next year, and, according to the custom of the day, be married around the age of 14 or 15. Jairus however was heartbroken, because without Jesus' help, his daughter would die. He was desperate. So he found where Jesus was, and throwing his pride out the window, he fell on the ground at his feet. From the dust among everyone's shuffling feet he repeatedly begged Jesus to come and lay hands on her, so she would be made well and live.

Now this surprises us because in the ancient world children were not important at all. So many died before adulthood that some cultures didn't even bother to name children until they were older. Sons were considered better than daughters. So Jairus might have expected that Jesus wouldn't trouble himself with this little girl. Certainly on a later occasion the disciples didn't value babies or children (Matt 19:13-15). They considered that Jesus had better things to do than fuss with children and told the parents who wanted to bring their children to Jesus, to go away. Would Jesus be the same now? Would he care about one little girl?

The woman with a haemorrhage

But when Jesus heard Jairus' request he *immediately* set out with Jairus to go to his house. However, on the way an interruption occurred. You can imagine Jairus feeling agitated as Jesus stopped, turned around in the crowd and said, "Who touched me?" Jairus may have wondered why Jesus was delaying. His daughter's need was life-and-death. Why the delay for a second-order issue? The girl's need was urgent in the extreme; the woman's need was, well.... But no, Jesus stopped his journey, looked around and waited until a little lady came out of the crowd and literally fell at his feet, her body trembling all over with fear. In response to Jesus' question, she gathered every ounce of her energy and poured out to him the whole story of long-term anguish and suffering.

To have a continual haemorrhage was an absolute disaster in the Jewish society of her day. Apart from her bleeding and accompanying anaemia she would have suffered the most awful loneliness and rejection anyone could imagine. That was because 'bleeding' made her 'unclean' (Lev 15:19-30) and anyone who touched her or sat or lay on a chair or bed she had used became unclean and had to wait until evening, wash their clothes and bathe with water before they could continue with ordinary life.

If she had sexual relations with her husband, he would be 'unclean' and unable to participate in community life for seven days. At the end of which time he had to perform the routines of cleansing, washing and bathing. After twelve years of bleeding the likelihood was that there was little, if anything, of her marriage left. It is most likely that she would have been deserted by her husband and other family members. She may well have been living alone. To make matters worse she was also unable to enter the temple, or to share in its worship and have fellowship with God's people. She must have known an intense spiritual loneliness, cut off from any means of coming close to God.

As well as that, she had spent all she owned on many doctors and treatments, but instead of improving, her condition deteriorated. What might she have been prescribed? Research shows that doctors of the day may have prescribed any of the following treatments for her condition:

- drink a goblet of wine mixed with ground up rubber, alum and garden crocuses
- eat Persian onions cooked in wine, while someone says "Arise out of your flow of blood."
- have a sudden shock
- or carry a burnt ostrich's egg in a special cloth.

All very expensive!!!

This poor woman, whose name is not recorded, had reached the limits of her endurance. Jesus was her last resort. So she devised a plan to overcome the enormous problems she would have in getting his help. First, she could not just go to Jesus and ask to be healed. That was impossible. No respectable woman of her day would speak to a man in public and she would not expect one to speak to her. A Jewish rabbi would not even acknowledge his wife, mother, sister or daughter if they met in the street. For a woman to speak in public was considered sufficient grounds for divorce. If necessary, male relatives would speak for their women. Obviously this lady had no-one to speak on her behalf.

Second, out of common decency her condition was not one which she could discuss in public. The subject was taboo. It was an unmentionable "women's problem". So she devised a plan which would not break any of the cultural taboos. She would come up behind him in the crowd and touch the corner of the cloak he wore over one shoulder which hung down his back. She thought, "If I just touch his clothes, I will be healed." She believed that he could heal her, even without his being aware. And that was what happened. Her bleeding stopped. How did she know that would happen? How deep was her faith?

Now Jesus could have walked on, ignored the situation and hurried off with Jairus, but he was concerned for this lady. She had been an outcast for twelve years. No-one cared about her. She probably smelt and no one wanted to go near her. She had been damaged socially, emotionally, mentally and spiritually. And so Jesus did something that would have been her worst nightmare come true. He acknowledged her person, her history, and her need. She was mortified! He was requesting her to speak in public and to tell a stranger, a man, what her problem had been. I wonder what flashed through her mind? Would the possibility of her being cured now be taken away? Had

her honesty damaged her chances of being healed? Had she done wrong in touching Jesus? What would the people think?

Was Jesus being totally insensitive here? No, he knew what he was doing. Jesus knew his pastoral theology; address the person not the need! He ignored the cultural taboos and conversed directly with her. Listen to the tenderness of his reply. "Daughter, your faith has healed you." This woman who had been cut off from normal relationships for twelve years, needed not only physical healing, but the beginnings of spiritual healing.

Jesus did not want her to think that his clothes were magic. It was important that she exercised faith in Jesus as a person, and not in any magical power he might have. Jesus showed his love for her by calling her "daughter", the only woman he ever so named. She needed love and acceptance and he began that restorative process for her. He encouraged her to trust in him and to know that she could put her faith in God, the great healer. Whatever her physical needs, whatever her spiritual needs, God cared for her and she could now be at peace. His words to her were, "Go in peace and be freed from your suffering." He wanted her to become the whole person she was created to be.

This woman also had significant social and emotional needs. She needed to be received back into normal community life. In accepting her as a person in her own right, Jesus helped her to begin a new life in relationship with him and others. Jesus realised that that process would be hard for her. How does a person reverse twelve years of habitual self-deprecatory attitudes? Our modern descriptors of 'body image' and 'self-image' fairly describe her condition. Jesus looked past her condition to see the person she was in herself.

Jairus and his daughter again

Meanwhile, Jairus was waiting, probably impatiently. I wonder what he was thinking during this drawn-out conversation? His daughter urgently needed Jesus, but Jesus would not be hurried. Can you imagine Jairus' emotions when the messengers came and told him his daughter had died and there was no need to trouble the teacher anymore? Maybe she was Jairus' only child. Now he would never know what it was to see her blossom into womanhood or hold her children in his arms. Whatever Jairus was thinking, Jesus said to him, "Do not fear, only believe." What or who was he to believe in, to have faith in? Jairus probably thought that Jesus rated the needs of this sad woman as more important than his little girl.

It is interesting that both Jairus' daughter and the bleeding woman were considered unimportant by others in the society. Neither is named. Yet both were loved and called "daughter" by someone – including Jesus. Both have twelve years in their story. Both situations involved believing. Both take recourse, directly or indirectly, to Jesus.

While Jairus was standing there in shock and grief at the news of his daughter's death, Jesus dismissed the crowds and with his three closest disciples, continued with Jairus to his home. There they discovered the house in chaos, with family, friends and neighbours weeping and wailing loudly. Taking control of the situation, Jesus quietened the commotion, sent everyone outside and asked them why all the fuss since the child was only *sleeping*. The mourners knew better than that. What a stupid man Jesus was, if he couldn't tell the difference between sleep and death! And as they departed they had a good laugh at his expense.

Then as the noise subsided Jesus accompanied the distraught parents to where the body lay. He quietly took her hand and gently said, "Little girl, get up!" Suddenly before their eyes she got up and to their immense delight and utter amazement began walking around. Then Jesus strictly ordered them not to talk to others about this and told them to give her some food.

Here again Jesus showed pastoral sensitivity. He knew the needs of a twelve-year-old girl. They were totally different from the haemorrhaging woman but both went far beyond the physical. For this little girl to live a normal secure life in her village she did not need to be the centre of worldwide attention. She and her family needed privacy, not to be a walking sideshow to be pointed at or questioned. By his handling of the mourners Jesus left in their minds the possibility that maybe she was just sleeping. And then again if she was a typical healthy twelve-year-old, probably the first thing she said when she came back was, "So what's for tea?" Jesus understood twelve-year-old girls, (quite a difficult achievement at the best of times!!). He knew she was hungry and told the parents to give her something to eat.

Jesus and his relationship to other people

So let me ask again, why did the three Gospel writers include *both* these incidents as intertwined narratives in their record of Jesus' life and ministry? Why were they considered so important -- and why are they kept together? Maybe it was because Jesus on this day astounded everyone who observed his actions, by the level of his deep understanding and loving care for the needs of people whom society rated as nobodies. Who could be lower than an unclean, outcast, solitary older female or an unknown female child? Maybe even at the time of writing Matthew, Mark and Luke were still amazed at the capacity of Jesus to minister to people in desperate need and to care for them in every aspect of their lives.

We are often encouraged not to put God in a box. But this story contains the reverse revelation that God doesn't put people in boxes. The powerful re-telling of these incidents demonstrates Jesus' enormous capacity to relate to and minister to those in every strata of his society. Jesus did not specialise in the single-dimensional worlds of 30-year-old carpenters, or respectable fishermen, or synagogue leaders. Even the little people, the nobodies, the older woman and a young girl mattered. Against the culture of the day Jesus dared to speak to women and children. But it was not just a nod or look of recognition, it was an ability to relate to them in such a way that he understood their unspoken needs and treated them as whole people, considering their physical, social, emotional and spiritual well being. Each was valued, accepted and unconditionally loved and I'm sure they knew it.

Life in Australian society does not help us to be like Jesus, or to treat people like Jesus did. The very education system which we have gone through to help us become worthwhile members of our society, puts us in age groups which prevent us from interacting with a variety of people of different ages. Our Christian schools are not much better. Our suburbs gather like-minded families into groups of the one social strata or ethnic group. Frequently our churches also fail in this regard. We have ladies meetings or men's groups, boys and girls' clubs. We send the children out for Kid's Church with a few 16 year old girls and an older lady and expect they will be the church of tomorrow. We bunch young people into a youth group, give them a youth pastor and feel we have fulfilled our obligations to them. I rather suspect that Jesus would be/is horrified!!

Most Australians, first generation or fifth generation, in and out of the church, are very selective in whom they relate to. We like to be with people similar to us. They help us feel comfortable. And as Christians we like nice people, who are like us and share our culture and values. Jesus' disciples were probably the same, but Jesus blew those expectations apart. He did not come to earth to minister to young Jewish carpenters and neither should we. He had an amazing capacity to relate to children, women and men at all levels of society. And not just to relate to them, but to understand their deepest unspoken needs.

Us and our relationship to other people

I don't believe we can say, "Well, Jesus was God and therefore must be better with people than we are!" It's true that he was God, but he was also fully human. Jesus' capacity to understand and care

for people came as a result of his free choice. He was fully human and learnt to relate to other humans just as we have had to learn, but I believe he had the ability to really observe people at a deep level. He loved to be with them and to reflect on their lives so that he was able to put himself in their shoes and understand what life was like for them and knew how best to minister to them.

Are we like that? How well are you able to put yourself in the shoes of a five year old girl? Or a twelve year old boy? A homeless 18 year old or a 25 year old on a disability pension; a young single mother or an unemployed father; your own parents or grandparents; a recently arrived Sumali refugee or a company executive? Maybe God is saying it is time for you to step out in a new unfamiliar direction to bring Jesus to someone new. Maybe he wants you to learn what it is to walk in someone else's shoes. I question why so many at College want to be youth ministers and so few to work with children or women or the disabled? We don't have to ask ourselves the question here, "What would Jesus do?" We know! He tended to the needs of these two marginalised women by putting himself out, by speaking directly to the people that they really were on the inside, and by bringing divine resources to human need. Every one of us has access to these things. Our ministry calling requires us to, "Go and do likewise!"

Before we close I want to give one word of warning. While Jesus blew his society's cultural barriers apart in relating to men, women and children, his relationships were of a totally pure nature. There were no sexual overtones to his love and concern, and neither should ours be. We must never be naïve in relating to others, none of us is above temptation, but the remedy is not to cut off all relations with the opposite sex or with children, but to keep our hearts and minds pure and to know what safeguards we need to have in place when we do relate to them. That is why it is so important for all of us here to be part of one of the Safe Churches or Childsafe seminars. Ignorance is no excuse. Jesus never overstepped that line.

Last week I attended the memorial service for Rev Seton Arndell at Epping Baptist church. I had only come to know him in the last five years, so it was interesting to hear of his life as a whole. What came through to me was this man's capacity to relate to and encourage an enormous range of people of different ages, cultures and social position. He was born into a wealthy, land owning family on the Nepean River, descended from the ship's surgeon on the First Fleet, but as a teacher he related well to all kinds of people, including children and young people.

As a young missionary, in Papua New Guinea, while his seven old daughter cowered under the desk with her classmates in a locked schoolroom, he persuaded two opposing groups of warring tribesmen outside on the oval, to put down their spears, knives and axes and go home. As NSW Global Interaction Director, he related to men and women missionaries in preparation at Morling, and when they were overseas he continued to pastorally care for them and their families. As a Christian man, he related to women of all ages seeking to use their spiritual gifts in service within and outside the church. As a retired minister he related to all members and age groupings in a country church with a number of relationship difficulties.

Only God by his Spirit can give us the ability and the desire to do this. In today's text we see Jesus relating to two people – an older woman and a young girl – at critical times in their lives. If we are to represent Jesus we cannot escape from people in their hurts and pains, or try to avoid them. We need to engage with people – who they are, how they are, and where they are. That is our calling, which Jesus so beautifully models for us in the Gospels. May we daily grow more like Jesus in all our different relationships with others – for his glory. Amen.

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