

Encounters with Jesus

Readings: Isaiah 55 and Mark 5: 21 – end.

Today in our gospel reading we were introduced to a man called Jairus. And in Capernaum where he lives, Jairus is evidently someone who is a very well-respected and also someone who is a prominent figure in his local community. Mark describes him as ‘one of the synagogue rulers.’ And the implication in the text is that he’s someone who possesses power, privilege, prestige and position. He’s obviously a wealthy man, with a fine home and servants and someone for whom everything’s going pretty well until – - that is until one day disaster strikes. His little daughter falls ill, and it’s serious. She’s dying and he needs help. Understandably Jairus is devastated and this broken-hearted father desperately needs help – and it’s the sort of help that none of his earthly resources and connections can provide.

But Jairus has heard of Jesus. In fact, Jesus is the hottest topic of conversation in his local community. And it’s not surprising really, because Jesus is causing such a stir around the local area. - Now Jairus doesn’t understand everything there is to know about Jesus but he has heard of what he can do just by touching someone who is ill. And it’s likely he may even have seen Jesus in the synagogue or by the seashore when Jesus has reached out and touched someone and made them well.

When his little girl fell ill, you can imagine what must have been going through Jairus’ mind. If only I can get to Jesus – Jesus is my only hope. But it’s hard for Jairus. He’s only too well aware that as far as Jesus is concerned all his colleagues in the ministry and at the local synagogue are violently opposed to him. And so he knows that even being seen in the presence of Jesus is not going to look good at all. And then to be seen actually asking Jesus to come to his house is likely to be nothing short of disastrous. And so I can imagine him thinking. “Oh this is going to be embarrassing - to be seen asking Jesus for help. What’s everyone going to think of me?”

And it can be like that for us too. Jesus longs for us to draw close to him and to bless us in so many ways, but sometimes we shrink back as we let other things become an obstacle and get in the way. Things like fear and pride. “What will my friends think of me? What about my reputation? What will I have to let go or give up?”

Not only can these things get in the way of us coming to Jesus in the first place but they can also get in the way of us moving on with Jesus and progressing in our faith. It’s so easy, isn’t it, for us to get stuck into a rut and just settle for the way things are. But Jesus is looking for those who want to move on with him as there’s so much more that he wants us to enter into - and for us to embrace the whole adventure of following him.

And as for Jairus – well he doesn’t shrink back. This is too important, more important than anything else; his little girl is dying. And he instantly puts his pride aside and everything else that might be getting in the way and falls at the feet of Jesus and begs him (and he really does beg him) to come to his house to save his daughter.

Jesus moved by compassion and touched by the man’s faith agrees to go along with him to the house. But getting to the house is far from easy as the streets are utterly jammed packed with people wanting to get a glimpse of Jesus – a bit like a crowd pouring out of a football stadium after a big match. And the narrow streets are such that they can only push forward with difficulty. And all the time Jairus is getting more and more anxious and tense being highly conscious that his daughter’s life is slipping away with every second that is lost.

The story then takes a sudden turn. As amongst all the pushing and shoving - in the crowd is a woman – a pale and frail woman. A woman who for 12 long years has been suffering with a very severe haemorrhage condition. And it's been 12 years of absolute misery. And during that time she has spent just about everything she has on doctors and cures but no one has been able to help her. In fact, she's got worse. And then to add to all her misery, because of her condition, she's treated as an outcast - someone unclean and untouchable – someone to be avoided.

It's all too much for her and she too, like Jairus, sees Jesus as her last hope. And she's determined to reach him as she's desperate. But to do that she knows she must push and elbow her way through the crowd. She must reach him. She must. But she's weak and her strength is drained, and yet she's not going to give up. She must touch him, she must. And she continues to push and push her way through until she comes up behind him.

As she's far too ashamed to admit the nature of her illness - she knows she has to do it surreptitiously. "If I just touch his clothes, I'll be healed" she tells herself. "And then I can just slip away into the crowd without anyone knowing."

So far so good as she does just manage to reach out and touch the hem of Jesus' cloak. And immediately with that touch – wow - she knows she's been healed and the bleeding has stopped. And Jesus knows it too. The text says that 'At once Jesus realised that power had gone out of him.' And as he turns round he says: "Who touched me, who touched my clothes."

And the irony of it all is that the crowd at the time is so dense that people were touching and jostling him all the time. Yet there was something special about this touch. It was a touch of real faith and it makes her well.

"Who touched my clothes" says Jesus. And as he's stood looking around the crowd to see who's done it - there's a deadly hush as everything goes quiet and there's an air of suspense that's almost tangible. And whilst everyone's denying it's them, she knows it's her who is being called out. And the thought of it terrifies her but she knows what she has to do - and so coming forwards she falls trembling at the feet of Jesus and confesses everything.

Now we may wonder why Jesus asks the woman to make herself known to everyone when he knows it will cause her such embarrassment. Couldn't he have just let her slip away quietly? And so why does he expose her secret?

Well first of all I think for Jesus, he sees this as a first step in removing the terrible stigma of uncleanness from her. He wants her to know that he is not angry. He wants her to know that he cares and accepts her and tenderly calls her 'daughter.' And this not only helps to restore her self-esteem but also her standing in the local community as well.

And then I think Jesus also wants to make it absolutely clear that it's her faith in God working through him that has brought about her healing. It's not as though the touching of his cloak in itself means anything – that would be superstitious – no it's by her faith that she is healed and made whole. And so to make sure she doesn't just disappear into the crowd without knowing, Jesus wants to talk with her so she can better understand what true faith really is.

While all this is happening Jairus, as you can imagine, is becoming more and more agitated with the waiting. And it's not hard to see what must have been going through his mind: "Come on Jesus hurry up, hurry up – we need to be getting on." But then comes the news

that he has been dreading all along as messengers arrive from the house saying: “We’re sorry Jairus; but your daughter has died and so there’s no need to bother the Teacher anymore.”

As we might expect Jairus is numb with grief at hearing this. But Jesus overhearing the messengers says: “Don’t listen to them Jairus: just trust me.” And as they start moving again I’m sure there is something in the healing that he has just seen with his own eyes that has kept a spark of faith alive.

And as they eventually reach his home, it seems the funeral has already started as the professional mourners have already arrived. But Jesus asks them to leave. He then goes straight to where the little girl is lying. And taking her gently by the hand he speaks softly to her, saying: “It’s time to get up, little girl!” And as he speaks the life flows back into her young life and she gets up and walks around the room.

I find the bit that follows rather amusing - as while the others in the room just stand there in a state of amazement hardly believing their eyes. Jesus says “Well – don’t just stand there get her something to eat.”

And so what have these stories to say to us today. Well they obviously have a lot to say about faith and a faith that’s determined not to give up. A faith that’s determined to persevere. And something we might want to ask ourselves is whether we are doing enough to help and encourage each other to develop a faith that’s robust and resilient – a faith that doesn’t just melt away when we face those big challenges in life - those disruptive events we never saw coming and which shake us to the core.

It’s when these things happen that we need the sort of faith that gives us the confidence to reach out and touch the Lord Jesus like the woman who reached out and touched the hem of his garment.

And, as so many can testify, it’s often when we go through these testing times that Jesus can become more real to us than ever. And that’s because, it’s in those times we learn what it really means to trust and to lean upon him. And none of us are immune from these disruptive events that can have such an adverse effect on our lives. But as one commentator puts it: ‘True worship is about living in the ups and downs of the present, knowing that God is in control whichever way things may go.’

When things are hard we need that faith that perseveres and presses on and doesn’t give up. But what can easily cause our faith to falter or stumble is when we begin to wonder whether Jesus is really interested or really cares. And so many don’t seek after Jesus in these situations because they don’t think of themselves as really worthy of his attention. Yes, they believe in Jesus but they are not really sure he is concerned about them personally and their individual situation. But what these stories say to me is that he does care.

Yes, he cares and more than we can imagine. His heart is touched with our grief. When we are afflicted with disease and pain, he cares. When we are grieving the loss of dear ones, he cares. When we are confused, and in a maze of misdirection, desperately needing leadership, he has compassion for us. When we are mistreated, he feels for us.

And the reason that Mark tells us these stories in so much detail is because he wants us to notice the tenderness Jesus shows in them for human suffering especially how he never loses sight of an individual in their need even in the midst of a huge crowd milling around. And for us too. He knows what we are going through and he cares. Well I need to finish and so

I'd like to draw these few reflections to a close with some words from an old worship song from many years back which have always meant a lot to me:

Standing somewhere in the shadows you'll find Jesus
He's the only one who cares and understands.
Standing somewhere in the shadows you will find Him
and you'll know Him by the nail prints in his hands

Philip Newell (Reader)

Sermon preached at a service of Morning Worship at St Laurence's, Scalby on Sunday 7th
July 2019