

ATTENDING TO THE SCRIPTURES

Psalm 130

Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord.
Lord, hear my voice!
Let your ears be attentive
to the voice of my supplications!

If you, O Lord, should mark iniquities,
Lord, who could stand?
But there is forgiveness with you,
so that you may be revered.

I wait for the Lord, my soul waits,
and in his word I hope;
my soul waits for the Lord
more than those who watch for the morning,
more than those who watch for the morning.

O Israel, hope in the Lord!
For with the Lord there is steadfast love,
and with him is great power to redeem.
It is he who will redeem Israel
from all its iniquities.

Mark 5:25-34

Now there was a woman who had been suffering from haemorrhages for twelve years. She had endured much under many physicians, and had spent all that she had; and she was no better, but rather grew worse.

She had heard about Jesus, and came up behind him in the crowd and touched his cloak, for she said, *'If I but touch his clothes, I will be made well.'* Immediately her haemorrhage stopped; and she felt in her body that she was healed of her disease.

Immediately aware that power had gone forth from him, Jesus turned about in the crowd and said, *'Who touched my clothes?'* And his disciples said to him, *'You see the crowd pressing in on you; how can you say, "Who touched me?"'* He looked all round to see who had done it. But the woman, knowing what had happened to her, came in fear and trembling, fell down before him, and told him the whole truth. He said to her, *'Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace, and be healed of your disease.'*

This story should carry a warning for preachers, in my humble opinion:

"Approach with Care!"

I'll do my best. Part of that *taking care* today will be to attend to this story on its own, rather than as *'the story within a story'* that's how Mark's Gospel presents it, surrounded by the restoration to life of Jairus' daughter.

That's how it's often read in church, and appropriately so too. I'm all for hearing stories in their wider context. But I also have a sense that this particular story can get a bit lost in the wider context, so today it stands alone.

But why "*approach with care*" for preachers? Well, if we're not careful, we can miss quite a few really important things about the story – and that's true whether we understand it as a literal event or as a parable about Jesus.

We need to take care not to make sweeping statements about women's health. Us men need to remember that it's not our experience. (The gentlemen who once told Cathryn that he knew what it was like to be a woman because he'd been married for 43 years, was wrong!)

We need to take care to note that the woman in the story suffered not only the physical symptoms of her illness, but also social and religious consequences. Menstruation made a woman ritually 'unclean' and socially isolated, so in Mark's story this woman's permanent menstruation was grim indeed. Not to mention the cost of all the failed treatments, and the fact that her illness was understood as some kind of curse from YHWH!

We need to take care not to see her as merely a convenient person there to show the healing power of Jesus – a passive receiver of grace. If that had been the case, she could simply have stayed quiet after being healed, rather than presenting herself '*in fear and trembling*'.

We need to take care and note her courage when she's suddenly thrust into the centre of the story with Jesus – albeit that like Jairus' daughter, she doesn't get her own name!

We need to take care with these elements of the story. Even more, I think, we need to take care with the story itself, otherwise we might think it's simply a story of a healing miracle.

It's actually a miracle of a different sort: a miracle of relationship! The healing is part of that, yes, but I don't think it's the major part.

For me, the major miracle is that this woman is seen!

She exists! She is more than simply her illness. And she is drawn into the community of the gospel, with the assurance that her circumstances and illness are no barrier to Jesus' acceptance of her. He recognizes her as a person of faith!

But not just that: this is a two way encounter, a mutual meeting that says a lot about each of the people involved. I believe each of them are changed by the encounter.

The woman's body is healed, Mark tells us, because she takes the risk to reach out to Jesus. That's life-changing, although presumably she's still poor. The effects of 12 years of social isolation wouldn't disappear straight away, either, particularly if she doesn't have family or other support available to her.

Jesus is also changed, I believe: enlivened by her trust in him, and by her willingness to 'fess up' that it was her who touched his garment. He takes a risk in doing so, because she could make him unclean by their encounter.

In the midst of the crowd and the noise, and surrounded by his over-protective disciples, there's a moment of real, deep connection. The woman receives Jesus' gift of healing, and of hospitality. Jesus receives her gift of trust and brave spirit.

I picture the two of them standing together in the crowd, in a moment where all the noise and bustle, and everyone else, disappears... there's just the two of them.

I use the word "hospitality" very deliberately there. I've said before that my understanding of hospitality has been shaped in recent years by two understandings: firstly, the notion of "*visiting with*" which comes from the USA. Visiting with can happen anywhere, and is about the time spent together, rather than the venue. Each partner offers and receives hospitality, rather than me offering you hospitality at my house, or vice versa.

The second notion comes from Henri Nouwen, who expands on visiting with by talking about hospitality as the sacred space between those present, a space in which each is enriched and growing.

I see both those things in Mark's story of Jesus and the unnamed woman.

This is not a moment of "*happily ever after*" for either of them, and I don't think Mark the storyteller intended it to be.

As I said, the woman's life probably remained crushingly hard... and we know where Jesus' life led him.

But in his acknowledgement of her as a person, and his willingness to be present to her in the midst of her suffering, we see true grace in action. In her willingness to claim her healing publically, we see faith in action.

And for me, all of that makes this a story of true – and deeply holy – communion!