

NORTH BALWYN UNITING CHURCH

Sermon, 1 July 2012, Pentecost 6

Mark 5: 21-43, Psalm 130

SERMON: “Out of the depths”

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I am not sure where to start with this week’s scripture passage. There are too many angles from which we could approach the story, and to be frank, at this stage, none of them really satisfies me.

Not because they are not interesting, but because somehow they don’t quite cut the mustard for me. I sense something hidden in those two stories, something that moves out of sight every time I get near to it, something that has to do with one little word: the Greek word “gar”, or “for” in English. It is no coincidence that this three letter word drew my attention. It is this three letter word the gospel finishes with that I built most of my master’s thesis around some 25 years ago. It is a word that does not appear very often in the gospel of Mark, and when it does it more often than not signals something of importance.

But does it in this case? “For she was twelve years old” it says after the girl is risen and starts walking and talking again. What does that have to do with anything? Some scholars say the comment was put in as an afterthought (Morna Hooker in *Black’s New Testament Commentary*). Others concede it is a puzzling remark and suggest it may be referring to something we no longer “get”, but may have had meaning to the first readers (Bas van Iersel, *Belichting van een bijbelboek*). Others (Sacra Pagina, John R Donahue, S.J., Daniel J. Harrington S.J.) say it may be a literary link with the intercalated narrative, a detail recalled by an eyewitness, or of no significance at all. They may be right. Only thing is: I don’t think they are.

So let us read this story from the mysterious explanatory comment at the end: “for she was twelve years old”. The young lady in question has just started walking around, her tummy rumbling and ready for something to eat after she has been proclaimed dead by those around her, and asleep by Jesus. Now she is very much alive, ready and able to join in a celebratory meal with family and friends.

During the story she has grown up, from “a little daughter” at the point of death, to a daughter, then a child and finally a young lady that rises. In other words: not only is she restored to life, the words that refer to her indicate she also comes of age. And when does a girl come of age in Jesus’ day and culture? Exactly! When she is twelve years old. It is not only that this girl is raised from the dead, in fact when we go on this mysterious explanatory remark, the raising from the dead may not even be the most important part of the story. It looks like it is far more significant that she comes of age, she reaches betrothal age, and her ability to give life and bear children is no longer cut short but restored to her. In other words: She is raised to life, not only or primarily in a biological sense, but in a much more holistic sense than that.

Now let’s look at the other woman in the story. She is well past twelve years of age, but here again the figure twelve gets an important part to play. She has been suffering from an issue of blood for twelve years. Here again some scholars don’t regard the figure twelve as something of importance at all. They say the twelve is there just to tell us that it’s been a long time and that, by the standards of medical treatment available at the time, she must

have been close to death. Or perhaps that the figure is just there to link her story to the story of Jairus' daughter who is twelve years old. Again I think that is not doing the text or its writer justice.

Let's look at how her profile develops during the story: From a woman with an issue of blood, or, in other words, in the language of the day, from an unclean untouchable person, who would defile anything she came into contact with and would not have been able to even leave the house without someone to make sure everything and everybody was moved out of the way at her approach, she changes into someone who does the unthinkable. She not only ventures out, on her own, into a tightly packed crowd, she reaches out to touch the hem of a holy man, a rabbi she's heard has healing powers. Hoping she may be able to find healing stealthily, without being noticed. She is then being pulled out into the open and addressed as "daughter". This not only exposes to Jesus what she has done, but by exposing her, he exposes himself. For from the moment she touched him he has become unclean and untouchable as well. Again we encounter that small three letter word: gar. "For she was saying to herself, even if I can only touch the hem of his garment I will be saved".

Now guess what is, or rather what are attached to the hem of the garment of a Jewish man? His prayer tassels that will remind him of God's faithfulness and the Torah, the law of Moses he is committed to live by. The woman does not just touch the cloak of someone that was rumoured to be a miracle worker, she reaches for that part of him that connects him to the law and to his God, and renders him unclean.

But Jesus doesn't seem to care. He crosses over to her world, joins her in her uncleanliness, her isolation. "Depart in peace and be healed of your affliction". No anger at the difficulties she is causing him, but words of peace. Puzzling words of peace. Peace and be healed says Jesus. But, hasn't she been healed? Didn't it say so earlier in the text? The blood has stopped flowing, her body has registered a change. She has been cured. She will be able to re-enter society, be a daughter amongst God's children again, be able to bear children, give life, come out of her isolation. So why does she need to be healed of her affliction? Is there more going on than "just" the issue of blood?

While Jesus was still speaking to her the president of the synagogue, Jairus whose name means "bringer of light", receives news that his little daughter has died. We can all imagine that this news would have extinguished any light he may have been carrying into the world. That it would have killed him off. His little girl is gone. He is too late. Jesus is too late. He may as well stop bothering him. That's what the disciples think anyway. Jesus is busy enough.

Again there is word play here which I think is significant and meaningful.

One woman who may as well have been dead, has just been re-instated as daughter. Will this other daughter now, because of her, have lost her life? Isn't that how the world often works? Trying to stop the suffering on one side only to discover something much worse is happening somewhere else? With people of good will forever trying to staunch the flow of hurt and chaos, only to find that while they are working at one end, the world is collapsing at the other.

Death is coming at Jesus from every direction in the story. There is the woman whom no doctor could help who reaches out to him, there is the father who falls down before him begging for the life of his little one, there is the girl whose future gets cut off right at the

time where it should be opening up. What is there to do? Stop bothering the teacher? Throw up our arms in despair? Because there is too much?

No, because she said to herself: if only I can touch the hem of his cloak..... No, because she was twelve years old..... there has to be a future, these women need to be restored to life, need to rejoin the living, walk around and eat.

That's not all there is to it though. It's not that around Jesus fate and future are changed, it's not just that through his divine power things become possible that weren't, aren't, possible in every day, day to day life.

In a way it is not Jesus at all. It is faith. Faith that brings Jairus to Jesus, faith that brings the woman to touch the tassels of his cloak, faith that restores life to both these daughters of Israel, re-opens the future for two members of God's people (twelve tribes), re-instate (and instate) them as valuable life-giving and life-bearing members of society.

A woman who must have been of independent means, wealthy enough to afford numerous doctors, but with nobody to bring Jesus to her or her to Jesus without violating the law, re-enters the community cured of the illness that has kept her from participating in that community for 12 years and a twelve year old girl whose death is putting an end to every dream of her ever becoming a valuable and valued member of her community is raised to new life.

The text echoes with references to the resurrection story of Jesus. And not only because of that little three letter word, *gar*. The girl is raised as Jesus is raised, finds resurrection life, as he will. The woman is healed and saved and re-enters life through the resurrecting power of Jesus going out to her and restoring her to life.

Twelve years, and two daughters of the twelve tribes discover that life will only be possible for them if they reach out to God, to him who is the personification of the torah in faith, either by themselves, or through someone else who will reach out for them. That that is the only way in which they can enter the community of Christ where food is shared and people may be healed from their afflictions and find peace.

That as the world pushes in and calls for attention and healing from every side, Jesus walks and touches the untouchables, cures the incurable and raises the dead to life.

Literally? Sometimes, yes, but more often it will be a touch here and a nudge there, after which life resumes its course. "Remain healed from your affliction" says Jesus to the woman, suggesting that there will be other challenges ahead. "Give her something to eat" says Jesus to the young lady who has just found her feet, suggesting she will need sustenance for what lies ahead.

These miracle stories tell more than power beyond belief exercised by a rabbi way back then. They are stories that tell of the things that happen when Jesus' power is activated by people of faith. Saying nothing more, and nothing less, even when death and destruction push in from every direction, to not lose hope but to have faith. To reach out for the man Jesus and what he stood for, to get in touch with the faith he embodied, to trust that there is a power stronger than the pain and suffering life can throw at us, a power able to restore community, bring peace and see us through. Amen.