

19th November 2023 – Reflection: Mark 5:24-34 ‘Healing and freedom in Christ’

I wonder if you're the sort of person who likes being sidetracked? I sometimes do – usually when I'm forcing myself to attend to something I don't want to be doing. I'm sure I'm not the only one who can find all kinds of useful jobs to do to avoid doing the thing you really don't want to do! In those situations an interruption is most welcome. Any sort of disruption or distraction is better than this!

There are other times, though, when the appearance of the unexpected is something of a trial. I'm making great progress with my to-do list, then suddenly... some crisis arises and I have to switch tack. If you're like me, you may remember times – and regret times – when you've been short with someone because they interrupted you at just the wrong time.

Knowing what to do with an unexpected interruption is very much a matter of judgement. There are times when it's definitely best not to be distracted. On the other hand, there are also times when the interruption has something of God about it.

Jesus is a fantastic example of how to deal wisely with distractions. When it interferes with his core mission, he refuses to get sidetracked. However, I am also frequently challenged by how relaxed Jesus was about changing his plans if it meant being able to love or serve or bless someone else. Jesus was able to see God's hand at work in those 'interruptions' – and perhaps, like me, you'd like to have that kind of wisdom to be able to do that, too.

Today's story is a brilliant example of that. In fact, Jesus changes tack no less than twice in just a few verses. Just before we get to our text for today, Jesus is teaching a large crowd by the lake when Jairus arrives – and, on hearing Jairus' story, immediately sets out to help him. Imagine you were one of that crowd by the lake listening to Jesus, and watching him suddenly walk off? What would you really be thinking?

But, then, just as he's walking towards Jairus' house, Jesus is stopped again, by a woman who suffered with bleeding. What does he do?

Once more, the woman's need is more important than his to-do list – so he stops. Again, imagine you're Jairus in this situation, or one of his friends, or one of the core members of Jairus' synagogue here to support him – how would you be feeling? There are layers to this story that we can miss if we jump to the happy ending too quickly.

Before we get to the heart of the story, let's just take a moment to notice how Jesus is able to deal with interruptions and turn so many unexpected situations to good – to use every encounter as an opportunity to bless, to be fruitfully distracted in the service of the kingdom of God. If you're the sort of person who's driven by their 'to-do list', can I suggest there's a gentle challenge here. Indeed, for all of us, there might be wisdom this week in **taking extra care to notice the 'distractions' you encounter, and to ask if God might be in any of them?** And if God is – who knows how much good you might do by being 'distracted'?

But to return to the story, of all Jesus miracles I could have picked, why have I chosen this one to address the theme of 'Healing and freedom in Christ'? Well, there are a number of reasons why:

Firstly, and most simply, it demonstrates Jesus' remarkable power to heal. This is one where he doesn't even have to do anything as such, the woman is healed just by touching his cloak. If ever there was a story which showed just how much healing was integral to Jesus' ministry it would be this one.

Second, it encourages us to be bold in approaching Jesus. The woman here takes the initiative. Jesus doesn't see her initially, *but she sees Jesus* and has the faith – and the courage – to ask. Jesus says elsewhere that answers to prayer are *not* linked to the size of our faith – a little tiny mustard of seed of faith is enough – but answers *are* sometimes linked simply to us being brave enough to ask. So often we can talk ourselves into thinking that God isn't going to be interested in our problem.

But Jesus is interested even in the person who secretly touches his cloak. Everyone matters to him. This story reminds me to be bold to ask. Jesus is always more ready to meet us than we are to meet him.

Thirdly, and perhaps most importantly, today's passage also reminds us that **Jesus sees healing in a much broader dimension than just physical healing.** A vital insight that often gets missed is that the word for healing and the word for salvation in the New Testament is *the same word: sozo*. It gets translated 'saved' or 'healed' according to context, but its root meaning is 'made whole'. Here in this passage, Jesus finishes by saying 'your faith has sozo'd you' – it's usually translated as 'healed' in English, but what he really says is 'your faith has made you whole'.

The reason this matters is that this is not just a story about physical healing. Yes, it is a remarkable medical miracle. But Jesus also heals something else – he restores her to her place in the community. In effect he heals her relationships, and possibly also her self-esteem.

This is why he stops. After all, he knows that some sort of healing has happened, and he's on the clock, a little girl is dying. *If Jesus is only interested in physical restoration, why doesn't he keep going?* The answer lies in the laws of cleanliness which governed the culture. According to the Law, this kind of bleeding made a woman ceremonially unclean – she would have to undergo purification rites in order to attend the synagogue, or offer sacrifices at the temple. But if her problem is chronic and persistent, then she can never get 'clean' for any length of time; she is effectively shut out of, not just worship, but also 'polite society'. This is why she approaches Jesus as she does, secretly – because her medical condition has made her an outcast, shunned by neighbours and peers, isolated.

This is why Jesus stops. It's not to humiliate or embarrass the woman – quite the reverse. **It is to demonstrate to her community that she is not just healed, she is *clean*.** She can worship at the synagogue again (and note that synagogue leader Jairus sees all this, and probably many of his fellow synagogue worshippers), she can go to the market, she can chat to her neighbours. As Jesus says, she is now free from her suffering – not just her physical suffering, but her relational suffering, her reputational suffering.

To be made whole by Jesus is not just being saved from our sins, though of course it is that. It is also to see Jesus' healing and restorative work in every part of our lives – our emotions, our minds and wills, our relationships, even our work and service. None of us quite get there this side of heaven: but this story gives a picture of what true freedom looks like, the freedom that Jesus offers those who follow him. It is not the sort of selfish freedom we usually think of in the West – it is the freedom to be the people Jesus has created us to be: free to love, free to worship, free to live as children of God, secure in our identity.

Yes, we know that ultimately one day we will still die. Our bodies will still wear out. But we also cling to the reality that the wholeness that Jesus begins for us this side of the grave will be perfected on the other. And we sometimes get signs on this side of the grave of what that sort of wholeness will mean.

May the Lord inspire us through the example of this amazing, quiet heroine of our story – to have courage, to come to the Saviour, and to see him continue to lead us into wholeness. 'Daughter, your faith has made you whole. Go in peace and be freed from your suffering.' Amen.