

Fifth Sunday After Pentecost

27.06.2021
By Trevor Williams

Introduction

This week's Gospel raises questions about what we consider to be important and what we consider to be urgent.

I was taught that 'Important' can be a dangerous word, because when I name someone as an 'important person' I am singling them out for special attention and influence with the danger of treating others as 'less important' or 'not important at all' – people who can be disregarded.

'Urgent' is a similarly dangerous word. What is 'urgent' we feel, has to be dealt with immediately, in haste in order to avoid a dreadful outcome. Urgency with its singularly focused demand can blind us from seeing other options that could be revealed with just a moment's quiet reflection. What is 'Important' or 'Urgent' has the power to shape manipulate and limit our priorities.

Conflict often arises from the desperation of a person or group of people who feel that no one is listening and that their concern is of no importance to others and there is no urgency to address the matter. They feel disempowered and marginalized. 'Black lives matter' is just a recent example of what I mean. The conflict that arises from the marginalised can be a force for good, in shining a light on what is hidden and needs to be addressed.

Jesus in this Gospel passage shows that he is great disrupter of such preconceived notions of 'importance' and 'urgency' and offers us an example of remarkable freedom from prejudice.

This reading comes immediately after Jesus had gone to the Gentile territory on the eastern side of sea of Galilea where he had cured a deeply disturbed man and cast his demons into a heard of swine. Now he returns to the western shore, much closer to home. He meets two very different people, each in need in their own distinctive way.

Text

When Jesus had crossed again in the boat to the other side, a great crowd gathered round him; and he was by the lake. Then one of the leaders of the synagogue named Jairus came and, when he saw him, fell at his feet and begged him repeatedly, 'My little daughter is at the point of death. Come and lay your hands on her, so that she

may be made well, and live.' So he went with him.

And a large crowd followed him and pressed in on him. 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.'

While he was still speaking, some people came from the leader's house to say, 'Your daughter is dead. Why trouble the teacher any further?' But overhearing what they said, Jesus said to the leader of the synagogue, 'Do not fear, only believe.' He allowed no one to follow him except Peter, James, and John, the brother of James. When they came to the house of the leader of the synagogue, he saw a commotion, people weeping and wailing loudly. When he had entered, he said to them, 'Why do you make a commotion and weep? The child is not dead but sleeping.' And they laughed at him. Then he put them all outside, and took the child's father and mother and those who were with him, and went in where the child was. He took her by the hand and said to her, 'Talitha cum', which means, 'Little girl, get up!' And immediately the girl got up and began to walk about (she was twelve years of age). At this they were overcome with amazement. He strictly ordered them that no one should know this, and told them to give her something to eat.

Comment

Mark tells the story of Jairus and the chronically sick woman with all the drama and excitement of a thriller. But notice how Mark sandwiches the two stories together, inviting us to draw comparisons as each story sheds light on the other.

First Jairus. He was a ruler of the synagogue, elected or appointed by the elders to look after the building, its contents and the arrangements for worship. It was an honourable and respected position within a religious society.

But Jairus is beside himself. He is in panic. He urgently begs Jesus, saying over and over again, "My little daughter is in extremis!!" (*as Nicholas King translates it) "do come and lay hands on her so that she may be saved and may live."

Jesus goes with Jairus and a great crowd followed.

What was a very personal family crisis has become a public spectacle, the crowd were in on it, and they were excited and fascinated. Will Jesus get there in time before the girl dies? This is both important and urgent!

'The crowd pressed in on Jesus'. Do you recall being in such a crowd and what it was like and how excitement and expectation can become so contagious! I am remembering something like this before a football match, being swept along towards the match in a crowd of exuberant fans!

In contrast to the urgent, time critical crisis of a little girl near death, a woman,

with a chronic complaint of 12 long years was also in that crowd. Her medical problem meant that she was 'unclean'. She was definitely not an important person, and she had her complaint for a very long time, hardly urgent! She is also utterly alone, alienated from her family and all human contact. She is destitute having spent all she had to find a cure only for her condition to get worse.

Having heard of Jesus, she breaks all the rules and decides to join the crowd, to get close enough to Jesus to just touch his clothing. "That would be enough; I shall be saved." And as she touches Jesus' garment she knows she is healed.

But her planned retreat and escape is thwarted. Jesus says "Who touched my garments?" The woman, in fear and trembling, fell at Jesus' feet and told him the whole truth. Jesus says "Daughter" – that relational familial address says it all. She is told Her faith saved her and she could go in peace and be healed.

But what is going on while Jesus spent time with this woman, this outcast, this hopeless case, this unimportant one, what is going on with Jairus daughter? If you don't respond to an urgent crisis, you can expect the worst to happen! And it did! News comes that Jairus daughter had died. Jesus delayed and the daughter died. Don't bother the teacher anymore, Jairus is told, Jesus can't do anything now. Jesus turns and speaks personally to Jairus, 'Do not be afraid. Only believe'. Jairus is encouraged to hope beyond hope, like the woman had done. The crowd now were a total distraction and their confusion wasn't helpful so Jesus dismisses them and takes only his closest disciples with him.

The mourners had already gathered at Jairus' home, weeping and wailing at the death of the young girl. Jesus says the child is asleep. But the crowd knew better, in their anxious panic they feared the worst and it had happened. Jesus dismisses the crowd and takes the mother and father and the disciples in to the girl. "He takes her by the hand, and says 'Talaitha Koum'. After all the hysteria, the gentle affirmation of the little girl is a beautiful gentle gesture. The girl responds. The parents are ecstatic but are told that no one should know this. Some hope! The girl is given something to eat, (life goes on) and Jesus departs.

What can we see in the way Mark has sandwiched these two stories together?

May I suggest somethings to start with.

1. The difference between the two characters.

- Jairus holds a respected position in religious life society.
- He is well known.
- He is a credit to himself and his family.
- He has a steady job and his financial future is secure.

- He is facing a catastrophic crisis which requires immediate action, now.
- The woman is not named.
- She is an outcast. She is impure religiously and socially. She is shunned. Her ailment is held against her as many people think prolonged sickness could be a punishment for sin.
- She is alienated from her community and separated from those she loves.
- She has suffered for twelve long years. She is in poverty having used all her resources to pay for medical care.

2. The attitude of the two characters

- Jairus is in panic, driven by fear of the death of his daughter
- He turns to Jesus in desperation
- He demands Jesus attention, begging him verbosely, repeating time and time again his problem. He wants Jesus to act now.
- The woman has suffered long but has not given up. She is determined to find a cure
- She approaches Jesus with hopeful expectation. She doesn't demand Jesus attention, humbly, she just needs to touch his garment.
- With great courage and faith she touches his garment

3. Jesus response.

To Jairus.

- He gives Jairus full attention to the respected (important) ruler of the synagogue and agrees to see the girl at his home.
- Jesus refuses to buy into Jairus' panic. He is not distracted by the apparent urgency and the need for immediate action.
- The crowd are dismissed. Their excitement at such a spectacle is not helpful

To the woman

- In the midst of the excited crowd, Jesus perceives the touch of an invisible person who has touched him.
- Jesus wishes to meet the person. He gives his full attention to the 'unclean' woman. Jesus takes time to get to know her and hear her story.

At Jairus' home

- Jesus separates from the hysterical mourners and finds space with the family and the small group of his closest disciples.
- With great tenderness Jesus takes the child by the hand. The child is restored and given food.
- Jesus calmly departs

One writer has summed up Mark's purpose in writing his Gospel as the answer to two questions, Who is Jesus? And What must his disciples be like?

In response to those two questions, there is a lot to take from today's Gospel about who Jesus is and who we are called to be as those who wish to follow him.

Response

1. Who is the most important person you have met?

Can you remember the encounter. Why was the meeting important to you?

Who has had most influence on your life?

Why is that? How did that happen?

What is different between these two encounters?

2. Can you remember facing an urgent problem and how that felt?

How did it turn out in the end? Was it different from what you feared?

In hindsight, were there other options available to you?

3. Is prayer a useful practice for you in dealing with the problems of “importance” and “urgency”? Why does it make a difference for you?
-

Prayer

Creator God

You have made all people in your image

and through your love shown the value of each.

Forgive our pride,

As we seek to be seen as better than others

Forgive our lack of trust

When we are dazed by what seems urgent

Thank you for the example of Jesus' life

Who offers us a new way of freedom and peace.

Amen

Further Reading

- * The Bible, A study bible freshly translated by Nicholas King published by Kevin Mayhew. <https://www.kevinmayhew.com/collections/bibles/products/the-bible-hardback-edition-1501413>