

Jairus's daughter and the healed woman ...

... the Grand Sweep of the mission of God.

A sermon given on the on the Fourth Sunday after Trinity 27th June 2021, by the Curate, the Revd Dr Tim Kelly, in the Attended Communion Service.

Mark 5:21-43

Some people can be described as driven individuals. They're also the people who have very clear goals. These could be goals for their career or for their business or for what kind of house or car they are to have. A characteristic of such individuals is that they have a clear sense of where they are going, what they should be doing and the steps that they should be taking in order to realise their goals. Another characteristic is that they're often not easily distracted from their ultimate goals. If you try and give a task-driven person something else to do, to give them a task that doesn't fit in with their plan, they often find a way of avoiding it. If it doesn't achieve their end goal, then forget it; it's not going to happen. Now, of course, there are other words that you might use to describe people like this. Perhaps more positively, you might describe them as visionaries or strategic thinkers. They have their eye on the long term, their eyes on the far horizon, rather down in the foothills of the mountains: people such as Elon Musk spring to my mind, a man with a vision for sustainable electric vehicles and cheaper space travel who seems utterly intent on squashing any problem in his path that may stop him in achieving his goals.

But the question this morning, is it possible to be a driven Christian? Is it possible to be a driven church? There's an awful lot of talk at the moment about shaping the vision of the church: at national level ; a task force looking at the future and the shape of the Church of England in the twenty twenties in the Diocese of York there is a current and ongoing task to look at the strategic vision for the diocese, examining ways that we perhaps could and should be reaching people that we currently don't reach; looking at ways where we can become more like Christ and how we might all develop into a church of missionary disciples; and here in this church, we are similarly looking at those objectives for the mission and Ministry of Beverley Minister.

So, is this kind of strategic thinking appropriate behaviour for a church and for each of us as followers of Christ.

Well, I think we get some insight into that question and some guidance perhaps as well, by looking at today's gospel reading. Today's reading is often described as a story within a

story or put another way, it's a story that is interrupted by another story: that outer story is the story of Jesus being begged by one of the leaders from the synagogue, Jairus, to come and heal his daughter who's on the edge of death. Jesus agrees to go with Jairus and starts on the journey towards his house. But this outer story, this action, is interrupted by the woman who's been bleeding for many years, who comes to Jesus as he journeys, just to touch the edge of his cloak in order that she might be healed. This interruption, which was most definitely a positive experience for the woman who is healed, appears at first glance to be at the expense of Jairus' daughter, who is said to have died. But Jesus continues to Jairus's house, continues that outer story, and we hear of how Jesus brings the daughter back to life.

Now, superficially, Jesus could perhaps be criticised as having been distracted: he had failed to stay focussed on the task at hand. One might say that it's a good job that as the son of God, he can rectify that mistake and bring the daughter back to life. So did he manage to lose sight of that task at hand? I guess the question is, what was the task at hand?

Now there's some rich symbolism in the passage that we might easily miss, and I'm only going to scratch the surface. But firstly, did you hear the number 12 mentioned twice in the passage? We're told the Jairus's daughter is 12 years old. We're also told that the woman who approached Jesus had suffered from her condition for 12 years. Twelve is one of those numbers often used in the Bible for deliberate and special meaning, the number 12 is often related to the 12 tribes of Israel. So when we hear this, there's perhaps a deeper meaning in the apparent death of the girl as a symbol of the apparent death of the kingdom of Israel. Now, we know from plenty of other encounters in the gospels recorded between Jesus and the temple rulers that he often despairs at their inability to see the coming kingdom of God and to recognise the movement of the kingdom of God through his son. And back in the Book of Genesis, we are told God has made a covenant promise with Abraham as the father of the kingdom of Israel, that throughout the kingdom of Israel and through their purposes, all nations, all people will be blessed - a grand vision for all the people of the world.

So with the 12 year old apparently dead, does this mean that the grand vision is also dead and has Jesus in being distracted on the way, for his part, let the vision die? Note carefully that Jesus's words: "She's not dead, but sleeping." The kingdom of Israel is not dead, but sleeping. He calls her to wake up; he calls the kingdom of Israel to wake up; he speaks to

his called people and urges them 'awake!', and in doing so is reminding them of the covenant promise spoken over them and their ultimate calling to be a blessing to all people, to all nations.

Rather than failing in his vision or failing in a new task, he is re-igniting the original vision of his people: 'Wake up! Remember who you are!' So Jesus has a clear plan, a clear vision and a clear purpose. But what do we learn from this story, the story within the story, the apparent interruption of Jesus's important vision? Well, what we learn, I suggest, is that it isn't an interruption at all, it's also part of the vision. Remember that number 12 is not just significant for the daughter, but it's also significant for the suffering woman. She has been suffering for 12 years. She is also part of the kingdom to be restored. Through her bleeding, it's very likely that she was cast out to be on the very edge of society, the very edge of community, considered ritually unclean. Jesus restores her not just through physical healing, but through enveloping her within the community and significantly, enveloping her within the fold of his family.

Notably, this is the only occasion in the gospels where Jesus calls somebody 'daughter'. You might wonder which was it that was most significant for her: to be healed? Or to be called daughter by Jesus, to be so completely and wholly accepted by Jesus? So that love, care and inclusion shown to the woman is also surely another clear insight into what the Kingdom of God is like.

So this account of a story within a story isn't an account of two stories fighting each other or in tension, but instead two stories in harmony that are showing us something of the grand sweep of the mission of God.

But I asked earlier, is it appropriate for us to talk in terms of vision in the church and in our lives? Well, of the many things that we might learn from this passage, I'd suggest that we see very clearly that Jesus, to turn a phrase, is a 'man on a mission'; a man with his eyes on the big picture of the kingdom of God, and by his commissioning and instructing of us, is encouraging us to share and be part of that vision.

But importantly, by the example of the woman healed on the journey, we also learn another lesson. Our eyes should never be so fixed on the horizon, that we fail to see that the mission and kingdom of God is always right here in front of us. The kingdom and mission of God isn't over there, it's right here and now.

So as we journey, as we are called to radical love, care and inclusion, we need to see that this is also part and parcel of the mission of God. That journey and how we travel on that journey is as important as the destination.

Reading Text

Mark 5:21-43

²¹ When Jesus had crossed again in the boat to the other side, a great crowd gathered around him; and he was by the sea. ²² Then one of the leaders of the synagogue named Jairus came and, when he saw him, fell at his feet ²³ 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." ²⁴ So he went with him. And a large crowd followed him and pressed in on him. ²⁵ Now there was a woman who had been suffering from hemorrhages for twelve years. ²⁶ She had endured much under many physicians, and had spent all that she had; and she was no better, but rather grew worse. ²⁷ She had heard about Jesus, and came up behind him in the crowd and touched his cloak, ²⁸ for she said, "If I but touch his clothes, I will be made well." ²⁹ Immediately her haemorrhage stopped; and she felt in her body that she was healed of her disease. ³⁰ Immediately aware that power had gone forth from him, Jesus turned about in the crowd and said, "Who touched my clothes?" ³¹ And his disciples said to him, "You see the crowd pressing in on you; how can you say, "Who touched me?" " ³² He looked all around to see who had done it. ³³ But the woman, knowing what had happened to her, came in fear and trembling, fell down before him, and told him the whole truth. ³⁴ He said to her, "Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace, and be healed of your disease." ³⁵ 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?" ³⁶ But overhearing what they said, Jesus said to the leader of the synagogue, "Do not fear, only believe." ³⁷ He allowed no one to follow him except Peter, James, and John, the brother of James. ³⁸ When they came to the house of the leader of the synagogue, he saw a commotion, people weeping and wailing loudly. ³⁹ When he had entered, he said to them, "Why do you make a commotion and weep? The child is not dead but sleeping." ⁴⁰ 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. ⁴¹ He took her by the hand and said to her, "Talitha cum," which means, "Little girl, get up!" ⁴² And immediately the girl got up and began to walk about (she was twelve years of age). At this they were overcome with amazement. ⁴³ He strictly ordered them that no one should know this, and told them to give her something to eat.