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Introduction

Today's Gospel reading presents us with two stories of healing brought together in one of Mark's characteristic literary devices – intercalation: instead of giving us the two stories sequentially he starts telling us one of them but then allows the other to interrupt it, before returning to complete the first. By enclosing one story within another like this he is able, through a series of parallels and contrasts, to use each to assist in the interpretation of the other, and thus to reinforce the messages he wishes to convey to his hearers as part of his project of revealing the true identity of Jesus to them.

As so often in Mark's stories, the text is rich with observations on the dynamics of the human journey and its interactions – though these are not necessarily presented directly in words. Thus even though conflict is not a prime element of the text, it can still help us as we try to deepen our understanding of different elements of this.

Preparation:

Read through the text several times and then make some lists of all the points of similarity and contrast between the two stories (it might help to do this by looking at each of the main characters) Choose one or two to focus on and see whether, and in what ways, they help you to explore the text and its messages.

Text

Mark 5:21–43

When Jesus had crossed again in the boat to the other side, a great crowd gathered around him; and he was by the sea. 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 hemorrhages 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 hemorrhage 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 around 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

These 2 stories have some striking similarities e.g the lack (amongst all the named characters) of names for the two sufferers; the desperation of those seeking help; the instantaneous nature of the healing; the mention of 12 years etc., They also have some marked contrasts e.g the ages and social status of the sufferers; the chronic and acute nature of their illness; the presence/absence of references to medical intervention etc. Any of these could be a starting point for exploration.

However what I want to focus on here is something which is at once both a shared element of the stories but also a point of contrast between them. This is a story which is full of movement: held within the progress from sea shore to the house of the synagogue leader, characters experience various other changes of place/position/status. In fact the whole story is bookended with this as, in what is almost a type of ‘inverted’ inclusio (see notes for Lent 2), the drama begins with Jairus falling to his knees and ends with his daughter rising to her feet. In the second story there is a similar movement but in the reverse direction as the woman who has been standing behind Jesus falls down in front of him. Behind these explicitly described changes of posture there is an equally profound movement for both Jairus and the unnamed woman –and once again they are in opposite directions.

In the character of Jairus we have a very public figure (hence perhaps his naming) – one of the leaders of the synagogue and thus a man of status and position. He has a private grief –his daughter is very sick and looks likely to die – but such is his desperation that he accosts Jesus in public, before ‘a great crowd’ and begs his help. In so doing he reveals to all those present his need, his emotional state and his sense of powerlessness –things which might have been acutely embarrassing for someone in his position, not to mention also potentially risky, considering the reception Jesus has had from the religious authorities in various places (e.g. 3:6, 22). However as the story progresses, the space in which the action occurs becomes increasingly private as Jesus sheds the crowd, the majority of his disciples and finally the professional mourners and gathered family.

In the end it is only Jairus and his wife, Peter, James and John, who witness the healing and restoration of the sick girl. Jairus, who makes his need and his plea known publicly, has his prayer answered in a much more private place. Mark tells

us nothing about why Jesus chose this course rather than answering Jairus there and then (as he does in a similar situation with the Centurion in Matthew 8:13). However it is not inconceivable that in recognition of and response to the costly nature of Jairus' public approach, Jesus shields him and his family –and the inevitably intense emotions which are to come– from any further intrusive public gaze.

The movement in the story of the unnamed woman is the diametric of this, but also calls forth a matching response from Jesus. In contrast to Jairus she is an anonymous figure, unnamed and almost certainly on the fringes of society because of her medical condition with its threat of potential contamination for others. She too is desperate; and she too faces the possibility of embarrassment or humiliation and potential danger (in this instance ritual) if she approaches Jesus openly.

Unlike Jairus, her approach is covert: using the crowd as cover she comes up behind Jesus and touches him. However Jesus is immediately aware of a change in his own state and looks to see who has brought this about. Now the woman makes the opposite journey to Jairus, moving 'in fear and trembling' from deliberate hiddenness into the public gaze. Interestingly she does this of her own volition as a response to 'knowing what had happened to her'. Mark comments enigmatically that 'she told him the whole truth' leaving us to fill in the details. We are already privy to both her medical history and her interior thought world; but from the response of Jesus we might reasonably infer that, like Jairus, her private grief now also becomes public property, along with the faith which has motivated her desperate action. Once again we see Jesus respond to this costly action but this time within the public sphere which he uses to not only commend her faith and confirm the physical healing which she 'in her body' knows has happened, but also to affirm the relational connection which that faith and her actions have established.

So what can these two stories of movement between private and public spheres of revelation and action contribute towards our evolving understanding and practice of a spirituality of conflict? Perhaps the first thing to note – as we have done before – is that there is no 'one size fits all' approach. Even though these two situations share the same central dynamics – an appeal for help; an indication of faith; the public exposure of a private state – both require a different response to these. In both instances the movement of faith is recognised and the appeal for help is answered but in each case the mode and location of response is determined by the particularities of the situation.

Secondly they point up the need to be sensitively aware of when things would benefit from being dealt with in the private sphere – even if only temporarily – in order to allow space for expression of emotion or articulation of ideas away from the pressures of the public gaze.

Finally they show us that there may be sometimes be things which – even if they have their origins in the private sphere – need to be intentionally brought into the public sphere, for example to facilitate recognition, affirmation and celebration of new understandings or rebuilt relationships.

Response

Reflect on a situation of conflict –small or large– in which you are currently (or have been recently) involved.

Can you identify any elements where a movement from public to private or vice versa was helpful or might have been beneficial?

Do you find this a useful framework for reflecting on conflict and your management of it? If so, what are ways in which you could pro-actively engage with it in future situations?

Prayer

Jesus, You heard the pain of a desperate father;

You felt the touch of an invisible woman;

Help us to hear as you heard,

Help us to see as you saw,

Help us to understand as you understood,

And so help us to act as you would have acted

Whenever someone reaches out to us for help.