

Lord Over Sickness and Death

Mark 5:21-43

Introduction

I was reading the news this past week and I saw a couple of articles on children's lunch boxes which caught my eye. One article had looked at the difference between what is in the lunchboxes of children in a lower socio-economic area and what was in the lunchboxes of children in a well-off area. It was interesting that there was some quite strong reaction to the article and particularly about the amount of pre-purchased processed foods in the lunch-boxes as compared to fresh fruit and home-made sandwiches, salads, etc. The processed foods were found in the lunchboxes of kids in both well-off and lower economic schools.

There proceeded to be a follow-up article by Emma Beckett, a lecturer in food science and human nutrition at the University of Newcastle, who challenged the assumption that this was just caused by lazy parents. Emma Beckett wrote, "There are a variety of reasons why people might find food preparation difficult — from single parenting to disability or shift-work, just to name a few. Telling people to avoid processed foods without addressing the drivers that underpin those choices is like fighting a bushfire with a garden hose. Nutrition does not exist in a bubble — there are a variety of factors that need to be considered."

I see a connection between how Emma Beckett identifies a variety of factors which influence nutrition and how there are a variety of factors at play when we read about people being healed and saved in the Bible.

This morning we're looking at Jesus demonstrating that he is Lord over sickness and death. These stories are something of a climax as previously Jesus had demonstrated that he is Lord over nature and Lord over demons. However, although the climax of these stories is in the resuscitation of a young girl to life, these stories also demonstrate how the healing which Jesus brings is both more complex as well

as more wholistic than we may, at first sight, see. Also, not only is Jesus' healing more multi-faceted and wholistic, the faith which Jesus looks for is much more than a simple mental accent to particular facts.

Healing In Multiple Ways

So let us start looking at these stories to see the saving work of God and the healing which takes place. We notice that Mark again includes two stories together and he does so because both of these two stories have the themes of healing and faith.

After being introduced to Jairus and his request to Jesus to heal his daughter, who is close to death, Jesus is touched by a woman who has suffered from bleeding for twelve years and we'll focus on her for a moment.

The woman, over the twelve years that she had been suffering from this bleeding had spent all she had on doctors but hadn't got any better. Not only would bleeding have been a significant difficulty for this woman's health and in performing her daily activities, it would have also made her ceremonially unclean and so she wouldn't have been permitted to approach the temple and fulfil the religious duties which Israelites were commanded to do and which most desired to do. This woman was ceremonially cut off from God.

This woman has an almost superstitious belief that the power of Jesus would have transferred into the clothes he was wearing and so if she were to just touch his clothes she was sure she would be healed. In this hope she was right, she immediately felt her body healed when she touched Jesus' clothes. We read, "Immediately her bleeding stopped and she felt in her body that she was freed from her suffering."

In one sense this is a fairly straightforward healing from illness but the story doesn't end there. "At once Jesus realised that power had gone out from him. He turned round in the crowd and asked, 'Who touched my clothes?'" There are of course questions as to how it is that Jesus had power to heal someone but didn't know who it was that

his power had healed? Some people wonder whether this is just a pretence on Jesus' part as his real intent was that he wanted the woman to have the courage to identify herself. While that may be possible, I think that it's more likely that in the incarnation of God the Son becoming human that there were limitations and his knowledge was not as complete as it was before the incarnation.

The disciples are confused and somewhat incredulous about the whole question. There are so many people around, how could Jesus even be thinking about who touched him. ““You see the people crowding against you,’ his disciples answered, ‘and yet you can ask, “Who touched me?”””

However, as Jesus keeps looking around, the woman comes forward and admits to Jesus what has gone on. The conclusion of this little story is so brief that you almost wonder why Jesus bothered to feel the need to speak to her but there is more going on here than we first see. “But Jesus kept looking around to see who had done it. Then the woman, knowing what had happened to her, came and fell at his feet and, trembling with fear, told him the whole truth. He said to her, ‘Daughter, your faith has healed you. Go in peace and be freed from your suffering.’”

The word for ‘healing’ and ‘salvation’ are the same in the Greek and so when Jesus says, “your faith has healed you” he is also saying, “your faith has saved you.” What is the healing and saving which has taken place? To start with, there is the obvious physical healing which takes place in the woman - her bleeding has stopped. However, as I mentioned, this illness would have also made the woman ceremonially unclean so that she wouldn't have had access to the temple (the physical location associated with the presence of God). As such, this physical healing also saves the woman in that the woman's connection with God is also healed.

But why did Jesus effectively force the woman to come forward? No, I don't think that Jesus is just pretending here, but there is also something to be gained, a healing if you like, by this woman coming forward to Jesus and saying what has happened. First, by this woman publicly coming forward and through Jesus publicly declaring that she is indeed healed, Jesus is also giving her back a standing in the

community which she would have also lost by being declared unclean. This woman has not just suffered physically but she has also suffered socially and Jesus bids her go in peace and free from her suffering and so able to re-engage (to be reconciled) with the community.

Second, and connected with Jesus' declaration that she is healed, it can also be said that Jesus heals the woman of a mistaken understanding of healing. Have you ever considered that it is an act of God's love and saving work to correct bad theology (a bad or incorrect understanding of God and his work in the world)? I mentioned earlier that it appears that the woman had something of a superstitious, almost magical, view of Jesus' power and how she could be healed. But Jesus' power is far more than 'the force' in *Star Wars* or any magical ability. Jesus' power is closely tied to his person and it is important for this woman to recognise that it is Jesus who grants healing. It was important for the woman to recognise that it was her faith in Jesus which brought healing, not some magical practice. The assurance which Jesus gives and the blessing for her to go in peace helps correct this woman's understanding of Jesus and his power.

Having considered the depth and variety of ways in which the woman was healed and saved, it is almost an anti-climax when Jesus resuscitates Jairus' daughter. "Oh yeah, she was just raised from the dead. No biggie!" Not really, the raising of Jairus' daughter is still the climax to not only these two stories but also to this series of stories where Jesus demonstrates that he is Lord over nature, Lord over demons and Lord over sickness and now death. The defeat of death, the demonstration that Jesus is Lord over this great fear of humanity, is indeed a climax and an obvious demonstration as to the healing and saving power of Jesus.

However, while this is a clear demonstration of Jesus' power, it's also important to see the way in which Jesus executes his power. "he took the child's father and mother and the disciples who were with him, and went in where the child was. He took her by the hand and said to her, 'Talitha kum!' (which means 'Little girl, I say to you, get up!'). Immediately the girl stood up and began to walk around (she was twelve years old). At

this they were completely astonished. He gave strict orders not to let anyone know about this, and told them to give her something to eat.”

Jesus cares for the family and for the child in this time of great concern. Jesus doesn't just issue a blunt command but the care of his speech prompted the disciples to remember the very words of Aramaic which Jesus used, “Talitha koum!” Not only is there care in Jesus' speech but he's mindful of the girl's need for food and so tells her parents to give her something to eat.

People may say that nutrition doesn't exist in a bottle and that there are other factors to be considered, well these two stories demonstrate that Jesus' healing and saving work doesn't happen in a bottle either. Jesus seeks to bring true healing to people's lives, addressing social as well as physical suffering, and he seeks to do this with care and compassion for the whole person. How might the truth of this impact our prayers for people? Do we pray that people get right with God or come to church but we never think to pray about family problems someone might be facing or basic practical care that people need support with? I'm glad that I'm here in the Lockyer Valley because I think that people in rural communities are often more mindful of this than people in the city but I'm sure it's something that we can still grow in.

What Does Faith Look Like (cf. vv. 23, 28, 34, 36)

So then, having considered part of the multi-faceted nature of Jesus' saving and healing power, we now turn to see how this passage contains a strong emphasis on faith with faith being both described as well explicitly talked about. But what is faith?

George Michael sang “You gotta have faith”, Bon Jovi exhorted people to “Keep the faith” and Joe Cocker asked people to “Have a little faith in me.” It seems that faith is one of those words that is often talked about but not always well defined.

'Faith' is the same word as 'belief' and so some hold that this means simply to accept something as true. I believe Captain Cook sailed to Australia. For other people faith means to accept something without any evidence or even despite contrary evidence. It is this kind of thinking which often pits faith and science against each

other. “You have faith and so believe in Santa and the Tooth Fairy but I have science and so believe in chemistry and physics.”

These ideas are not how faith is defined in the Bible. The Bible uses the title “The Faith” to describe content of what is believed, what we would call, “The Christian Faith” but faith in the Bible normally has to do with trust and specifically trust in Jesus. Also, the idea that ‘faith’ is divorced from any evidence is not really found in the Bible. Indeed, Jesus calls upon people to evaluate his conduct and miracles to determine whether he should be trusted.

Here is these stories we see that Jairus, despite the risk to his position in the Synagogue because of controversies about Jesus, was desperate enough to trust Jesus to heal his daughter. “Then one of the synagogue leaders, named Jairus, came, and when he saw Jesus, he fell at his feet. He pleaded earnestly with him, ‘My little daughter is dying. Please come and put your hands on her so that she will be healed and live.’” We also see that the woman trusted that Jesus had power to heal her, and she did this on the evidence of what she had heard. “When she heard about Jesus, she came up behind him in the crowd and touched his cloak, because she thought, ‘If I just touch his clothes, I will be healed.’”

Here we have two examples of people believing that Jesus could bring healing on the basis of reports about him which were circulating. However, these stories also teach us more about the faith that Jesus is looking for.

First, as we’ve seen, Jesus looked for the person who touched him and this prompted the woman to come forward and show her trust in Jesus. Trust in Jesus should be public. I know that secret believers exist in countries where their lives will be threatened but it is widely recognised that such a situation is not desired and shouldn’t be the case for most Christians. We’re told in Romans 10:9-10, “if you declare with your mouth, ‘Jesus is Lord,’ and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you profess your faith and are saved.”

Second, we also saw that Jesus corrected the woman's understanding about Jesus' power and showed that her faith (her trust) was to be in the person of Jesus. We are to trust Jesus, not just his power or works. This is why at the Lord's Supper Jesus said, "Do this in remembrance of me."

Third, when the people came to Jairus to tell him that his daughter was dead, Jesus called upon Jairus to continue to trust in him and not have his faith dictated to by the circumstances. This is one of the tensions that many Christians experience. Faith is grounded in evidence (what we know of the person and work of Jesus of Nazareth) and yet it is not conditional on circumstances (we trust that Jesus is more powerful than our circumstances).

It can thus be summarised that in Mark's Gospel faith consists of a serious and public, personal continuing commitment. Let me say that again, in Mark's Gospel faith consists of a serious and public, personal continuing commitment.

Conclusion

Where are you at with your faith? Do you mentally know that Jesus walked this earth and made claims about himself and the kingdom of God but you're reluctant to trust him with your whole life? Or do you trust Jesus but really hope that no one asks you about it? Do you trust in Jesus but find that circumstances quickly mean that you take your eyes off Jesus and try to solve problems in your own strength?

Let's pray that our faith will be a serious and public, personal continuing commitment for as we have such a trust we may find we experience more of Jesus' multifaceted healing.

[pray to close - address the whole needs of people, to put full public trust in Jesus]