

THE FINAL FRONTIER

Mark 5:21–43

We've been looking at the miracles of Jesus in the early chapters of Mark's Gospel, casting out demons and healing diseases. Mark points out the effect the miracles had at the time. Chapter 1 shows the reaction of the ordinary people. The miracles gave Jesus a certain celebrity status, though much of this popularity was shallow and superficial. Chapter 2 shows us the reaction of the religious people. He was very unpopular with them, so much so that they made plans to kill him. By chapter 3 various reactions to Jesus have become fixed: the hostility of the Pharisees, the enthusiasm of the crowds, the commitment of the 12 disciples, the opposition of the Teachers of the Law, the concern of his own family.

In chapter 4 there's a break from the actions and reactions. Most of this chapter is taken up with Jesus' teaching. He tells a parable, the parable of the sower: same seed but different results. Why? Because the soil is different. Jesus' message is the same but it meets with different reactions. Why? Because some hearts are hard and the word can't get in. Some hearts are shallow and the word can't get down. Some hearts are crowded with other things and the word can't get room. But some hearts are open. The word gets in, gets down, gets room, and produces fruit, the fruit of right living.

It's a challenge to us and our reactions. It's the same Jesus, the same good news, the same opportunity to have our sins forgiven, to put our lives right and keep them right. But whether or not that wonderful change happens depends on how we respond. We can be hard hearted and reject Christ. We can be half hearted and miss out on Christ. Or we can be whole hearted and receive salvation in Christ.

Jesus used other parables to get his message across to the people and finally, after a long day of teaching, he got into a boat with the disciples. As they were crossing the lake a violent storm got up and threatened to sink the boat, with Jesus and the disciples in it. The disciples were panicking but Jesus was sleeping. They woke him up. 'Don't you care if we drown?' Jesus got up, rebuked the wind and said to the waves, 'Quiet! Be still!' The wind died down and suddenly it was completely calm. As if this wasn't enough, Jesus said to them, 'Why are you so afraid? Do you still have no faith?' Mark says, "Then they were terrified and asked each other, "Who is this? Even the wind and the waves obey him!"

There was something even more terrifying than that violent storm. It was the absolute power of Jesus, his authority. 'Even the wind and the waves obey him!' Jesus had demonstrated his power over evil spirits, over disease, and now over nature.

When we reach chapter 5 we return to yet more of Jesus' miracles. The very first miracle which Mark recorded was the exorcism of an evil spirit. Now he recounts another similar miracle but in even more detail. In the first half of chapter 5 the violence of the storm at sea is echoed in the violence of a soul in torment. Verses 3 to 5. '[A man with an evil spirit] lived in the tombs, and no one could bind him any more, not even with a chain. For he had often been chained hand and foot, but he tore the chains apart and broke the irons on his feet. No one was strong enough to subdue him. Night and day among the tombs and in the hills he would cry out and cut himself with stones.'

Jesus delivered him by driving out the demons and sending them into a huge herd of pigs. The pigs careered down a steep bank into the lake and were drowned. It says something about our attitudes to Jesus that to this day there are some people who criticise Jesus for this. They are more concerned about the fate of the pigs than the salvation of the man. And most of these people have had bacon for their breakfast.

In the second half of chapter 5 we find another miracle described in detail, a miracle of healing this time, or rather what is set up to be a double miracle of healing. Jesus had crossed back over the lake in the boat which he had used earlier. It must have been an almost eerie feeling for the disciples to get back into that boat and back onto that water, to make that same trip back but in calmer waters this time.

On the other side a large crowd had gathered. This crowd was to play an unwitting part in the drama about to unfold. They're mentioned in verse 21, verse 24, verse 27, verse 30 and verse 31.

In this crowd Mark draws attention to two individuals, Jairus, who was a ruler of the synagogue, and a woman with an embarrassing and debilitating physical problem.

What kind of people were they? They could not have been more different. There was a very basic difference. One was a man. One was a woman. We need to remember that difference and remember that it is a God-given difference. We need to make sure we let it enhance our lives. We have different perspectives, different approaches, different reactions to situations. It's not that one is right and the other is wrong, but that together they contribute to a better picture, a more fully human understanding.

Perhaps you'll see the irony in this, but one was powerful and the other was powerless. I wonder which was which. One was accepted. In fact he was at the top of the social ladder, at the top of the religious ladder. He was a synagogue ruler. The other was excluded. Her physical problem made her ritually 'unclean'. She was not allowed to have contact with holy things or she would contaminate them. She was a social and a religious outcast.

They could not have been more different and yet they had this in common. They were both in desperate need and they both came to Jesus with their need. One came to Jesus with words. The other came to him with just a touch. But Jesus made clear that what counted was not their words or the touch but their faith. Only believe and keep believing.

There are all sorts of little details in this story, fascinating insights, not only into the event itself but into how Mark interpreted it.

There is the fact that we are given Jairus's name (verse 22). That's quite unusual. If you look back you'll read about a man possessed by an evil spirit, a man with leprosy, a paralytic, a man with a shriveled hand, and so on, but no one's name is given except the disciples – oh, and that man with the name Legion, not his real name, of course, but a name symptomatic of his real problem. And then, out of the blue, we meet a man with a name – Jairus. I think it's an indication of how important he was. He wasn't just a man with a problem. He was Jairus, a synagogue ruler, a big noise in that district.

That gives an added significance to the next thing we read about him, his humility. He fell at Jesus' feet and pleaded with the Master on behalf of his little daughter who was dying. He was the big religious leader and yet he was willing to admit his need and come to Jesus for help.

But I want you to notice that his important position didn't give him any preferential treatment. Faith is the great leveller. When the woman pressed through the crowds to touch Jesus he stopped and spoke to her. He didn't say, Jairus is an important man. He should have priority. He took time with the suffering woman.

Another little detail which Mark noticed was the inability of the doctors to cure her. Verse 26: 'She had suffered a great deal under the care of many doctors and had spent

all she had, yet instead of getting better she grew worse.' It's interesting that Luke, who was a doctor, simply says, 'No one could heal her' (Luke 8:43).

Verse 30 tells us 'at once Jesus realised that power had gone out from him'. What healed the woman was not the belief in her mind but the power of Jesus.

Then there's the reaction of the disciples in verses 45 and 46. They failed to distinguish between a bustling crowd and a touch of faith. But Jesus didn't. What counts today as it did then is not how many people are here but how many are reaching out in faith to Jesus. Huge crowds, but only one who reached out in faith to touch Jesus.

Meanwhile poor Jairus has had to put up with the inevitable delay. And there's worse to come. Verse 35: 'While Jesus was still speaking, some men came from the house of Jairus, the synagogue ruler. "Your daughter is dead," they said. "Why bother the teacher any more?"'

The people who came from the house of Jairus were well-meaning, I'm sure, but they were gross and insensitive. They not only lacked faith. They lacked tact and sensitivity.

There's another subtle nuance in Mark's account. Jesus said to the woman with the bleeding, 'Daughter, your faith has healed you.' Daughter. In the very next moment, Mark says, while Jesus was still speaking, people from Jairus's house came and said, 'Your daughter is dead.'

And their attitude was: That's it. It's all over. There's nothing more that can be done. Jesus can cast out demons. Jesus can heal disease. Jesus can control nature. But that's it. We're talking about death now, the final frontier. 'Why bother the teacher any more?' *The teacher.* Mark began his Gospel with the spectacular statement that Jesus Christ is the Son of God. And now he faces the ultimate test. Is he really the Son of God? Or is he just 'the teacher'?

Verse 36: 'Ignoring what they said, Jesus told the synagogue ruler, "Don't be afraid; just believe."'

I've said before that if Mark were writing today I'm sure he would have written a screen play rather than a book. Verse 37 is another of those points where we could envisage the atmosphere changing dramatically. It's been noisy, it's been crowded, it's been exciting, it's been wide-screen action. And suddenly the mood changes. 'Your daughter is dead. Why bother the teacher any more?'

Suddenly, in that electric moment, the camera pans right in to Jesus. 'Don't be afraid. Just keep on believing.'

Verse 37: 'He did not let anyone follow him except Peter, James and John the brother of James.' Suddenly, no crowds, no noise, no excitement. At the house there's a commotion but Jesus soon puts a stop to that. And now we're in a darkened room with just a mother and father, three disciples, a dead daughter, and Jesus. Death: the final frontier.

'He took her by the hand and said to her, *Talitha koum* (which means, "Little girl, I say to you, get up!"). Immediately the girl stood up and walked around (she was twelve years old). At this they were completely astonished' (verses 41 and 42).

And then there's that final detail, an evidence both of an eye-witness account and an evidence of the practicality of Jesus. 'Give her something to eat.' That's real spirituality, not an unearthly holiness that ignores the basic needs of our normal lives but a practical demonstration of good, common sense, that sometimes is not so common.

Such deep needs, such diverse people, such wonderful power and grace. And the key to it all is faith – trusting Jesus. Will you reach out to him today in your need, whatever

that need may be. He'll know and he'll respond. Don't be afraid. Just believe. It may be a small hurdle. It may be the final frontier. But you can trust Jesus. You must trust Jesus.