

Ex - sistere

(Mk 5; 21-43)

When Jesus had again crossed over by boat to the other side of the lake, a large crowd gathered round him while he was by the lake. Then one of the synagogue rulers, named Jairus, came there. Seeing Jesus, he fell at his feet and 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.' So Jesus went with him.

A large crowd followed and pressed around him. And a woman was there who had been subject to bleeding for twelve years. 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. 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.' Immediately her bleeding stopped, and she felt in her body that she was freed from her suffering.

At once Jesus realised that power had gone out from him. He turned around in the crowd and asked, 'Who touched my clothes?'

'You see the people crowding against you,' his disciples answered, 'and yet you can ask, "Who touched me?"'

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.'

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 anymore?'

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

He did not let anyone follow him except Peter, James and John the brother of James.

When they came to the home of the synagogue ruler, Jesus saw a commotion, with people crying and wailing loudly. He went in and said to them, 'Why all this commotion and wailing? The child is not dead but asleep.' But they laughed at him.

After he put them all out, 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 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. He gave strict orders not to let anyone know about this and told them to give her something to eat. Jesus left there.

We all know this account in Mark. Just reading it already gives us a lot to think about. Jesus always seems to be on the move and yet he never seems to get tired. We are still in the first third of this gospel which is said to have been the first to be written down. He was an artisan carpenter and probably literate since he reads a text in Hebrew (Isaiah) and speaks Aramaic, and he started his life in public with a resounding sermon in the synagogue in his village of Nazareth. It is about the arrival of something else, a 'good news' story. Twelve companions have joined him, and instances of healing are becoming so frequent that he is obliged to flee the crowd to the other side of Lake Galilee. Thinking he has found a peaceful place, he is confronted by a furious madman who claims to recognise him and in his delirium provokes the headlong rush of a herd of pigs over the Gerasene cliff in Jordan. Pursued by neighbours who are frightened by this miracle he must cross back over the lake with his companions. He is tired, falls asleep and as a storm builds, he wakes up and calm returns. As soon as he reaches the Western side of the lake he is immediately accosted by an important man, the head of the synagogue, whose daughter is near death. He therefore must get up and get on the road again.

I have chosen the long version because this 12 year old girl who comes back to life concludes the story about the woman who was ill for 12 years, consulted a great number of doctors without success, her situation even getting worse, and who only dares to come close and touch just the clothes of this Jesus she had heard about.

We can visualise ourselves in this crowd with the disciples rattled by the clamour: what happens is not really anything they might notice. Could there be anything more improbable than such a healing? Could there be anything more forbidden than this tenuous physical contact, almost sensual since it is done by a woman who is impure because she is bleeding? She believed the impossible and the impossible happened. As with the Canaanite, her wish is boundless.

What intrigues and interests me the most is Jesus' reaction. Not only does he notice this gesture when anyone at all in the crowd could have touched him, but even though he is faced with a fait accompli he is not offended and doesn't get upset, on the contrary he is pleased. According to the customs of the time, what has happened has happened 'in spite of themselves'. And in the text Jesus' conclusion after she has revealed herself is simply 'your faith has saved you', as is most often the case after his healing miracles in Mark. One could interpret this as 'what has just happened is not because "I am who I am", but it comes from you and you alone.' As with the Canaanite, he goes to the evidence and for me, as for Jonah in Nineveh, he notes a 'conversion' by someone greater than him. Each of us can interpret this unexpected event as irony or humour, similar to the mystery of 'forgiveness'!

On a purely philosophical level, a little bird suggested that I quote to you a fine gentleman from Lyon, Henri Maldiney. According to one of his biographers he was '*an amateur climber of peaks and of challenges, searching for handholds and controlling his breathing, by clearing paths he extended the flaw which makes up mankind.*' 'To exist', he wrote in 1976, '*is to have one's external appearance, which implies a flaw. But whether it is continuous or not, whether it concerns merging in front of or outside oneself, presence and existence imply dimensionally an act against logic, like a ship which should re-join its prow or a mountain which must climb its cliff. In the two cases we are enjoined simply to be.*' By means of the assistance of the Other through an encounter?

Don't our depressed patients whose pathology makes them far too passive lack that desire and that crazy audacity to believe that healing and well-being are always possible? And for our part as therapists, is it not often necessary to 'let go' and to humbly make note of the better health and well-being of our patients without us having had much to do with it.

The number twelve (12 tribes, 12 apostles, 12 years) is not magical, rather symbolic, but for those of us who believe when we are not assailed by doubt like Jesus' disciples in the boat, that woman who dares to touch Jesus and that child who wakes up and becomes a woman who will in turn give life to others remind us that the risk of existing is not in vain, that healing and well-being are within our grasp, just as they were for the heroine of our story. The Other is no doubt not that far away!?