

Interruptions

Psalm 30; Mark 5:21-43

On the one evening I had off last week, and deciding to eschew reading an improving book, I settle down and started flicking through the television channels. If it wasn't endless football matches, it is now coverage of Glastonbury. Next week it's Wimbledon, and may the Lord help us when the Olympics, Open Championship and more and more interrupt the programming schedules for weeks to come. To say nothing about the General Election in this country, and the one in France, and the Presidential one in the United States.

Interruptions. Annoying, sometimes necessary, often unsettling, but giving an opportunity, if we choose, to rethink, realign, reconsider, reconstruct as we put things back together.

"If we were to give the (Mark) text a title, it might be something like, 'Jesus the Multi-tasker.' In our fast-paced twenty-first century world, this story within a story might not seem terribly odd. In the context of the slower pace of the first-century world, however, the story conveys a sense of urgency, frenetic energy, an even confusion – qualities, it appears from the Gospel stories, that were neither unknown nor frightening to Jesus. Jesus' attention to the desperate need of both (people) portrayed in this text becomes a reminder for us of the God Who is never too busy to hear our prayers and respond to our pleas in amazing or unexpected ways."ⁱ

Mark in his gospel uses the word 'boat' eighteen times in his gospel: three occurrences are in chapter 5 and there are six in the next chapter. Every time Mark uses 'boat,' listen for lessons that prepare disciples to become the Church. The Bible's first physical symbol for the community of faith is the Ark – Noah's Ark, in Genesis. God's gift to carry God's creation through the storms of

life. Life on the ark was like life in the church if the storm were not so fierce on the outside, people would refuse to endure the confusion on the inside.

Boats in Jesus' day were fragile vessels. In this part of Jesus' ministry He is training disciples and challenging the entrenched religious leaders of His day. Boats and seacoasts, like the synagogues and Temple, were places where people meet God. In these stories from the middle of Jesus' ministry, storms and challenges, fear and doubt, sickness and healing, despair and hope tumble out one after the other. Mark is describing life in the Church and in the world – in Jesus' day, and in ours too.ⁱⁱ

In this passage, Jesus is summoned by a desperate father to the bedside of his dying child. Jairus, the ruler of the synagogue, is a person of substance. According to the values of his day he is socially secure. He is male, a father, surrounded by his family, and holds a position of privilege. None of that shields him from the desperate reality of his dying 12-year-old daughter.

Contrast Jairus with the woman who has been bleeding for 12 years. She is the victim of the same religious system that gave Jairus a place of honour. She is physically weak. Because of the flow of blood she is ritually unclean and condemned to social isolation. She could touch no-one, and everything she touched would be tainted by her uncleanness. She has no name, no status, no value; an outcast, anonymous female living a wretched life with no family or support.

Jairus, anxious but confident, comes publicly to Jesus for help, but the healing of the little girl came in private. The woman, intensely private, makes her approach in secret, yet her healing took place in public.

For all their differences, they have much in common. They need help, and they interrupt Jesus from His ongoing work and ministry. The woman reached out to touch Jesus and is healed. Jesus

reached out to touch the little girl, and she is brought to life. Touch is one of the vital aspects of what Jesus came to do.

The girl and the woman are bound together by the number twelve. The girl is twelve years old, on the threshold of womanhood. She is about to come into her physical and social fullness, until death interrupts her life. The anonymous woman has endured twelve years of losing her lifeblood, of being continually menstrual, her physical rhythms disrupted, her social relationships dislocated, her life permanently interrupted.ⁱⁱⁱ

Healing comes through the touching of Jesus. He accommodates the disruption, allows Himself to be reached out to, and then reaches out Himself. His presence, through being touched, and touching, brings healing. As the woman is healed, the little girl dies. Jesus, made unclean by the woman who bled who touched Him, is the same 'unclean' man who goes on to bring resurrected life, new life, to the little girl. Jesus brings saving life to both women, because in the midst of His work, He allowed Himself to be interrupted. Or is it actually the fact that these interruptions simply draw our attention to what Jesus has come to be, as well as to do? Wherever Jesus is, then as now, there is the opportunity for healing, and the opportunity for life and new beginning. Jesus trails the hem of His garment through the world to this day which people can touch, find life, and discover what their interrupted lives and worlds might become. Not all will be healed in the way they want. Not all will come back to life in the way some crave. Jesus reaches out to help us with the interruptions in life, in the sickness and the healing, in the dying and the living, that newness and reordering might take place. There will still be times of mourning and dancing. There will still be sackcloth and clothing with joy, but through all the interruptions that intrude into our living, Jesus walks persistently, allowing us to find Him, when we are ready to look. "Do not fear, only believe."

Which is a tough thing to ask, when the hurt hasn't gone away, and the healing has not come. Or the complexities of work or relationships remain tangled and not resolved. Or the bereavement and the darkness do not lift, and the sackcloth rubs our souls raw. Nevertheless, Jesus walks persistently by our side, allowing us to reach out and touch. Or reaching out Himself to touch us when we are too broken or resentful or fearful or unbelieving to touch Him for ourselves. That is Who He is. That is what He does.

A time of pending election is a time of interruption for our nation; as it is for the peoples of France, and the United States, and Iran. From the fractious division and brokenness that we see around us, will the interruption only heighten the division? Given the character of much of public debate, it is little wonder that we bewail the political tribalism of this time with little appearance of healing or conciliation, yet alone new life. As one commentator notes, "We need to find a way to talk to each other if we are to have any chance of bridging divides. We need to allow ourselves to see our tribal adversaries as fellows...engaged in a common enterprise."^{iv} We need to break out of our parallel universes, our actual or virtual gated communities. We need to exit the echo chambers of social media and meet each other in person – to engage with rather than demonize our liberal or conservative adversaries. The imperative is to translate promising local instances of people coming together not to dwell on their differences but to find common ground where they can work together...The C19th British Prime Minister Benjamin Disraeli said of Lord Liverpool: 'In the conduct of public affairs his disposition was exactly the reverse of that which is characteristic of great men. He was peremptory in little questions, and great ones he left open.'^v Might it just be, in this time of ongoing interruption, that we will be jolted into an awareness that our spiritual and moral task is to find connection beyond the interruption; to recognise the barriers, but to choose to build bridges?

Whatever the result of the General Election on 4th July, on 5th July people will still be hurting; people will still be hungry; people will still be homeless; people will still be grieving. Yet I believe there will be people, in the midst of their interrupted lives, who will still want to be hopeful, and will be willing to work towards that hope, whoever is in power. Because of the election result, or despite the election result, our calling is to follow Jesus and live a practical faith so that people can touch it, or be touched by it, as the hem of His seamless garment trails through our divided and interrupted world. Our imperfect yet insistent faith exercised strongly and gently, directly and indirectly, may heal the world yet, and give it new life, and new beginning. In the interruption, "Do not fear, only believe."

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit

Amen

ⁱ Beverly Zink-Sawyer, *Feasting on the Word, Year B Vol 3*, p189

ⁱⁱ Art Ross, *Feasting on the Gospel, Mark*, p152

ⁱⁱⁱ Leith Fisher, *Will you follow Me?* p80

^{iv} Amy Chua, *Political Tribes: Group Instincts and the Fate of Nations*, p207

^v James Mumford, *Vexed, Ethics Beyond Political Tribes*, pps 12-13