
How to Read the Bible in Three Dimensions

Mark 5.21-43

A Sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on July 2 2006 by the Revd Canon Dr Sam Wells

The Bible is not a book. It was not written to be a book. Instead, it is a collection of scrolls, long stretches of papyrus that were kept in a dry place, treasured by faithful communities, and brought out to be read aloud on special occasions. Those who translated the Bible into Latin started producing copies as huge books. But it was not until the sixteenth century, with the invention of the printing press, and the Reformation which sought to put the Bible into the hands of the common people in their own languages, that the phrase 'my Bible' meant anything. The Bible became a book.

I want today to look at Mark's intertwined stories of Jairus' daughter and the woman with hemorrhages. I want to show why it matters *where we are* when we're reading the Bible. I'm going to look at three places where we might read these stories, and what they might mean when we read them there. I'm going to start with you sitting alone, at home, with the Bible on your knees. We could call it the Reformation position.

When you read the story by yourself you are struck by the parts that resonate with your experience. You notice Jairus. Here is a wealthy and powerful man, a major figure in his synagogue. He has no hesitation in coming before Jesus. He's the kind of person who calls up a Dick Brodhead and assumes he can give him an appointment the same day. But the big thing in his life is that his beloved 12-year-old daughter is sick, and close to death. He falls at Jesus' feet and begs Jesus to help. When we read this it puts us in touch with our own deepest needs. Is this how we pray to Jesus? Fall on our knees at his feet... and beg? Even if we are a big wealthy guy? Maybe we should. And then we notice a very different approach. The woman with hemorrhages isn't the kind of person who assumes Jesus will clear his calendar to meet her. She doesn't think she's worth a moment of his time. She comes up from behind him. She touches the hem of his cloak. So one person comes to meet Jesus face to face, demanding his attention, and another comes round the back, not daring to meet his eye. Which way do you come to Jesus? Do you come through the front door or through the back door? Which way do you pray – through articulate requests or silent touch?

And then we notice that though their approach is very different, both people find health – or salvation, which is the same word in Greek. The first thing Jairus says to Jesus is, 'My daughter'. The young girl comes as a member of a loving, supportive family. By contrast the woman with hemorrhages comes before Jesus alone, and in fear and trembling. She has no support team, no network of love and trust to help her through her life's struggle. But Jesus says to her that same word, 'Daughter'. In other words, 'If you've no family, be a part of mine'. Hear Jesus saying that: 'If you've no family, be a part of mine'.

And we notice both stories involve touching. But it's a different kind of touching. Jesus touches Jairus' daughter: he takes her by the hand. But in the case of the hemorrhaging woman, it's the other way round. She touches him. This shows us something wonderful. With Jesus, it's not just that he touches us – moves us, restores us, inspires us, forgives us, heals us: it's that we touch him – he is moved, affected, touched by our gesture, neediness, faith. He feels the power go out from him. He notices the difference made in his life by a poor, outcast, friendless woman. He notices us.

And look at the subtle difference between the prayer of Jairus and the prayer of the woman. Jairus' prayer is for his daughter; the woman's prayer is for herself. Both prayers lead to healing and salvation. We see the faith of Jairus, and the faith of the woman. We know nothing about the faith of the young girl. The young girl is saved by the power and love of Jesus and the faith and persistence of her father. Does that not inspire us, as we shape our intercession list? Many of us who worship at Duke Chapel live comfortable lives: we don't face the social exclusion that the woman with hemorrhages know every moment of the day. We may face personal torment, like the agonizing illness of a young daughter, but when we look at this story, we know we are Jairus. Well, let's *be* Jairus: let's get on our knees and plead with Jesus for the sake of the desperate and those at the gate of death; let's keep faith, even when the bystanders tell us it's hopeless; let's discover that we and the socially excluded are as one when we come into the presence of Jesus. That's why the Prayers of the People are perhaps

the most important thing we do at Duke Chapel: they are the great leveler, that brings a Jairus church to its knees before Jesus.

As you see, there's a lot in this story to read from the Reformation position, home alone. But I want you to read this story again in a different place. This time we're going to read it in a group, a group of Christians active in costly relationship with one another, committed to friendship with the poor and in witnessing for justice among the powerful. We could call this reading the Bible in the Liberation position. What do these people see in this story?

They see a story about how different everything is depending on whether you have money or not. Jairus is a big shot, a leader, a rich man. He gets straight to Jesus. Five times Mark mentions the crowd in the first few verses of this story: they are surrounding Jesus. But Jairus gets put straight through to the boss. The woman with hemorrhages, by contrast, is about as excluded as you can get. She had been bleeding, and thus unacceptable in public, for a very long time. She had spent all her money on quack doctors, who had only made her worse. She was poor, sick, unclean and alone. Not much has changed. In this country today to be sick means to be poor, more often than not, and to be poor means to be sick, all too often. To be poor and to be sick means to be heavily dependent on a strong network of family and friends: but if you had a strong network of family and friends you quite probably wouldn't be poor, or at least not as poor as this, and quite possibly if you weren't this poor you wouldn't be sick. The woman with hemorrhages is in a vicious circle of poverty and ill health.

But this isn't just a story about wealth. Because Jairus is also in despair. Jairus has a problem that money can't solve. In this country such a problem is becoming an increasing challenge to the imagination. You could say that America's goal today is to get to a point where there is no problem that money can't solve. When we come up against problems that money can't solve we become very angry, and we assume someone must be criminally to blame. We are a Jairus culture, but we are sometimes slow to learn what Jairus learns in this story. Poor Jairus finds that his wealth can't protect him this time. His daughter dies, and becomes ritually unclean – just as the hemorrhaging woman is ritually unclean.

And that brings us to the heart of this story from a liberation perspective. It is fundamentally a story about purity and about sex. The young girl is 12 years old, the age when formally she becomes a woman and can be married. The hemorrhaging woman is a woman for whom sex and childbirth in this culture are impossible. Jesus comes into physical contact with both of them. It ought to make him ritually unclean. But astonishingly it doesn't. Rather than their impurity making him impure, the opposite is the case: his holiness makes them holy. As with Jesus' relationships with Gentiles and with sinners, it is Jesus' holiness, not their impurity, that is contagious.

Think for a moment how revolutionary this is. Purity is fundamental to rhetoric about sex: you just have to reflect on the importance of a white dress at a wedding. When we panic about what teenagers get up to at parties or at college, we probably think less about whether they are becoming loving, trusting, forgiving people than about whether they are losing their purity and becoming somehow dirty. Purity is also fundamental to the rhetoric of race: in America of all countries, the famous melting pot of cultures, there is even now a pernicious myth of some kind of purity that must remain unsullied by mixing races. Absurd as the idea of a pure race is, cocktail of historical and biological nonsense as it may be, it nonetheless has a powerful hold on the imagination.

But these stories show us that with Jesus, purity is not a possession we're in constant danger of losing, but a gift we're constantly offered the possibility of receiving. Holiness is infectious. Purity is contagious. It's impossible to overestimate what a revolution this is to the way most people are taught to think about religion. Jesus has so much love, so much healing power, so much compassion, that when the unclean woman gets anywhere near him she's infected with holiness. That's surely what we long to be as Christians. Not frightened shadows who fear relationship because it might make us dirty, but people so full of compassion and truth and longing for justice and gentle understanding that holiness infects everyone who comes anywhere near us. We long for contagious purity, the purity of forgiveness and healing.

For many people, the Bible has become a book that they read alone or perhaps in a study group regularly or occasionally. And as I hope I have shown, there is so much to find in the Bible when we read it this way. But

there is a third place in which reading the Bible is vital and life-giving. This is the place that gives the Bible its third dimension. And that is in church, as we are doing now. We could call this reading the Bible in the liturgical position.

What does it mean to read the Bible in church? It means to read the ministry of Jesus in the gospels in the company of the stories of God's relationship to Israel recorded in the Old Testament and God's destiny for the Church set out in the remainder of the New Testament. It means to set the reading of scripture in the context of an ordered series of liturgical actions that seek to embody Jesus' life, death and resurrection and shape our character to reflect that saving action of God. It means to set our own hearing of the Bible story alongside the way other, perhaps very different, people hear the same story so the whole people of God can be enriched by the diversity of his creative purpose.

And when we read the stories of Jairus' daughter and the hemorrhaging woman in church this is what we find. We realize that the number 12 is vital to both halves of this story. The young girl is 12 years old and the woman has been bleeding for 12 years. And the number 12 is a shorthand way of referring to Israel, because Israel was the nation of 12 tribes. So here is a story about a dearly beloved daughter of God called Israel. This dearly beloved daughter is sick, indeed close to death. She is desperate. And those faithful people in Israel call on God to save her. And Jesus comes into the story to save Israel, to restore her to health and relationship and well-being. And when he appears he is thronged with the overwhelming breadth and depth of human need. Rather than see this as a distraction, he points out that the poor, the outcast and the unclean are at the very heart of God's story, and that they are the children of God too. Then he resumes his ministry to Israel, faces derision, misunderstanding and mockery from the bystanders, and raises Israel to life from the point of impurity and death.

The story of the young girl and the bleeding woman are intertwined with one another just as the story of the rich and the poor, of Israel and the Gentiles, of the righteous and the sinners, and of the pure and the outcast are wrapped up in one another. There is a 'correct' way to come to Jesus, and the synagogue leader comes the correct way. But there is also a direct way to come to Jesus, and the uncouth crowd, in the form of the bleeding woman, comes the direct way. This is telling us that we can never simply see the profound neediness of the world outside the context of God's overall relationship with Israel and the Church, and one can never tell the story of God's love for Israel and the Church without remembering that the poor and the outcast are at the heart of that story.

So reading the Bible challenges each of us to a three-dimensional faith – alone, together, and in the Church, in devotion, in action, and in worship. The stories of Jairus' daughter and the hemorrhaging woman show us what it means to come to Jesus, front door or back door. They show us what it means to pray for ourselves and for others. They show us that Jesus transforms both the rich and the poor. They revolutionize our understanding of purity, showing us that in Jesus it is holiness that is wildly contagious. And they offer us the whole history of salvation, placing God's love for the poor at the heart of his love for Israel and the Church. This is what it means to read the Bible in three dimensions. Now it is time for us to live in three dimensions.