

**“BACK FROM THE DEAD” (Mark 17)**

***Mark 5:21-43***

We're back this week in the same passage that we considered last week, a passage with two stories intertwined. Having looked at the story of the woman with the haemorrhage last week, we're now going to consider what Mark has to tell us in the other part – the story of Jairus' daughter. But I'm starting with a couple of problems. Firstly, there were so many positive comments after last week's sermon that I'm aware this week may well be a bit of an anticlimax. The second, more serious, problem is that I'm aware that we are looking at this story of the healing of a young girl in the week that some of you here are grappling with your own emotions and memories of young children who are no longer with us. When I planned out this bit of the series I didn't realise the significance of this week and I did think about changing it, but I've stuck with this story and I hope it gives us all encouragement and comfort.

Jesus is now actually **demonstrating** the life of the new kingdom that he's come to announce. We have read of his preaching and teaching, we have listened in on the debates and discussions he has had with the leaders of the religious and legal establishment, we have heard him call people to give his agenda a try rather than sticking to their own worn and wearying agendas. And now he is showing us what that agenda is like in practice, giving us a glimpse of the Kingdom of God that he has come to inaugurate. We've seen his transformation of the life of a violent, life-denying, demon-possessed man in the graveyard of Gerasa. We have witnessed the healing of a woman who had a chronic disease. And now he is confronted with another situation in which there is suffering and pain, but suffering and pain shared by the members of a young girl's family, not experienced only by the girl herself.

In this part of the story of Jesus that Mark is slowly building up, this picture of the man who came to change the world, he makes it clear that Kingdom of God is all about seeing things from a different perspective. The life of the Kingdom of God needs to be viewed through a different lens from the one we are accustomed to using. Our human way of looking at things holds few surprises. We base all that we see and do on experience, on what we expect to happen because that's the way it's always happened. And twenty centuries on from the time of Jesus, we also have a complex web of other information on which to base our expectations about life – information that has been drawn from the experience and observations of others and codified into theories and hypotheses, into laws and formulae, a scientific, determinist world-view that says this is how things work and don't expect any different. Jesus, with his miraculous activity, forces us to stop and think, to pause before jumping to conclusions about the way this world works, to see things from the perspective of the Kingdom.

**1. NOT PRESSURE BUT TIME**

Jairus was one of the leaders of the synagogue, an influential and probably pretty well-heeled member of the community. He looked after the synagogue and supervised the actual running of the worship, although he didn't lead it himself. He was a kind of administrator, but he was the one who got things done. So he was probably used to sorting things out efficiently and quickly. His daughter was ill, dangerously ill, it seems. And, at twelve years old, she was coming up to the age when she would be married off. This was a double blow for the family: not only was there the pain of watching a beloved child suffer, but also the difficulty of seeing all your hopes for the future on the verge of ruin. Something needed to be done and at just the right moment, Jesus the miracle man walked into the village.

Jairus hurries to Jesus and pleads with him to come and do something and Jesus seems to respond with no hesitation. Off they set for Jairus' home. But there's this great crowd which seems to be following Jesus wherever he goes and they're getting in the way. Can you imagine something of the frustration Jairus must have felt? He's succeeded in getting Jesus to come with him and now they can't move along as quickly as they'd like. It's a bit like those times when you're in a real hurry and the car in front is a little

Metro driven a by a man in a flat cap and car coat who is clearly intent on reading to his passenger every word of every road-sign that he passes. The road is single carriageway and you just can't get past on your way to the urgent appointment you have. Or you've just nipped into the supermarket for a carton of milk that you need to pick upon before the meeting you're already late for. You nip in the Express checkout lane because there's only one person in it, but she seems to have picked up only items with no bar codes on and everything has to be checked by the supervisor running to the four corners of the store. And once it's all finally bagged up, there's the look of surprise on the shopper's face that she's actually got to pay for all this. It's like she's never been shopping before! And now her purse is at the bottom of the bag. And she's determined to find the right change. And she remembers three coupons she's been saving, but they're in one of her pockets. Your choices seem to be narrowed down to shoplifting or murder if you want to get to the meeting!

And Jairus's patience is wearing thin. Then suddenly there's this disturbance over the woman who sneaks in, who jumps the queue to be healed. And Jesus stops to talk with her. What is going on? The girl will be getting worse with every minute's delay. But Jesus seems totally unconcerned. He's not worried about the pressure, about rushing around. He's not prepared to capitulate to the agenda of the synagogue leader. He'll do things in his own time and his own way, because he knows deep down that God's timing is perfect. This is God's work and he'll accomplish it as and when he sees fit.

That's the Kingdom perspective. *We* want everything done now, this instant. And we live in a society totally focussed on that. Our culture is a culture of the instant and so we expect everything to happen like that, for our convenience and our gratification. Mobile phones, the internet, 24 hour news channels, bank machines, call centres, credit cards – they're all symptoms of an instant society. And we get so worked up when we don't get what we want when we want. We cannot see beyond the next few seconds. But that's not the way of the Kingdom. God calls us to be patient, to take our time, to enjoy the moment rather than rushing on to the next thing, to have a conversation rather than exchange a hurried greeting, to pause and think rather than hurtle thoughtlessly into the next crisis. Easy to say, I know, but I believe that the ministry of Jesus is full of signs that the Kingdom is a place to take time, to refuse to subject ourselves to the pressure of someone else's agenda. He never hurries along and there are at least two occasions – this one and the death of Lazarus – where his delay causes all kinds of emotional upset to the families involved. Life's a heck of a lot more complicated now that it was in Jesus' time, but I believe we need to think about just how much we allow our use of time (which is, after all, a gift from God) to be dictated by an agenda that has nothing to do with the Kingdom of God.

## 2. NOT FEAR BUT BELIEF

As Jesus turns away from the woman, two of Jairus's neighbours arrive to say that it's actually too late now. The little girl is dead. There's no need to bother Jesus – death is final and it's all over. Can you imagine now what Jairus must have gone through at that point? Why wouldn't Jesus do as he was asked? And on top of that all the anxiety about the future now without his beloved daughter. But Jesus appears to ignore the intervention of the neighbours and, looking at Jairus, says, "*Don't be afraid; just believe.*"

The old order, the old agenda is one of fear, of anxiety, of loss, of pain. Jairus knows what to expect. Someone has brought him bad news and he knows from his experience what will follow. And he's afraid. He doesn't know how he will cope. But the new order, the new agenda, the life of the Kingdom is different. It's founded on belief. Jesus tells him, in words that the doctrinal gatekeepers of today would dismiss as simplistic, liberal and woolly, "*just believe.*" **Just believe?** Believe in what? And on what grounds?

Well, we'd say, I'm sure, he means believe in him, in Jesus. But it doesn't say that. And what is he to believe about Jesus, anyway? In all the Christological formulae of the Christian creeds? That Jesus can sort him out? That he can have a better future? That his little girl will be OK? A bit of all that, I reckon

– apart from the Christological formulae, maybe. Because, let’s face it, they all add up to the same thing in the end. If you believe in Jesus – in who he is and what he can do – then you’re looking at a better future anyway. And if you believe in a better future, you’re not really going to get that without Jesus.

Remember what we said right at the beginning of our journey through Mark’s story of Jesus? When Jesus said, “*Repent and believe*”, he was saying, in effect, “*Give up your own agenda and trust me for mine.*” So here, when he tells Jairus not to worry but to believe (πιστευετε - as in *I:15*), he is saying, “*Trust me for my agenda.*” He knows what the future will bring. Jesus has read to the end of the book: he knows what the outcome will be. Jairus, of course, hasn’t, and this is going to mean a huge step of faith. Why should he trust Jesus and his agenda? All that’s happened so far since he went to Jesus is that his daughter has died. And there’s no comment by Mark that he does express any belief, any more faith in Jesus. Jesus just strides off in the direction of Jairus’s house and gets on with it all.

But that’s the Kingdom perspective, that the new agenda. There’s no need to fear, no place for anxiety. Jesus has it all sorted out. We may not be able to see that now. We may feel frustrated and impatient. We may feel angry and bitter about our situation and the way in which Jesus seems to be ignoring what’s going on. We may feel like saying with the neighbours, “*Why bother with him any more?*” But we need to refocus our gaze through the lens of the Kingdom, to be prepared to look at things differently. We need to trust Jesus that his agenda is actually better than ours.

### **3. NOT DEATH BUT LIFE**

The neighbours said, “*Why bother?*” and Jairus may well have felt the same way. But he still went along with Jesus. Although, as Jesus was going to his house anyway, this isn’t maybe a huge step of faith. After all, the girl is dead. It’s all over. That’s the end. The story is over and over with a finality beyond even that of the madman in Gerasa and the woman with the haemorrhage. From a human perspective, that’s it. But not from the Kingdom perspective. In the Kingdom, death is by no means the end. In less than three years after this episode, Jesus will prove that himself in a dramatic end to this part of the story. But it’s going to be difficult persuading these people, these people who have no knowledge of the resurrection, who have no idea what is going to happen in Jesus that will proclaim the truth of the Kingdom to the world.

You see, we formulate our belief with hindsight. We have the whole story. We know the ending. And we’ve had a couple of thousand years to ponder on it all, to absorb it into our creeds and into our belief system. We know – in our minds at least – that death is not the end, that the Kingdom means life and life in all fullness now and for eternity. Jesus could not comfort these people with platitudes about seeing her again some day or being reunited in heaven. We believe that – or we try to convince ourselves of it when the death of a loved one hits us between the eyes – because we believe that Jesus blazed the trail for us that first Easter weekend.

So he demonstrated this Kingdom truth in a way that they could understand. He actually brought her back to life there and then. Their perspective was all wrong: they thought she was gone for good. Jesus translated what he believed, what the Kingdom was all about into words they could understand. “It’s just as if she’s asleep,” he said. And he made it all real. He’s done the same thing in the other two stories we’ve looked at here. The demon-possessed man needed to know that the demons were really gone, so Jesus showed him them rushing down the hill in a herd of pigs. The woman needed the assurance that she was restored to her place in the community, so Jesus called her out of the crowd and announced it to everyone within earshot. Jairus needed to know that he’d see his daughter again, so Jesus got her standing up and walking round and told them to give her some lunch.

Of course, as Jesus announced to the people in the house that the girl was going to live, they all laughed at him – “*laughed him to scorn*” is the literal translation there. But that’s the laughter of those who have

no hope in the Christian resurrection. That's the laughter of people with only one perspective on life, people who are unwilling to look at things differently, who are so tied in to one agenda that they can conceive of no other. But Jesus makes the Kingdom real, he acts and transforms things. "*Don't let anyone else know about this, though,*" he says. As if the family could stop people seeing their daughter running about again, after the neighbours had announced in the square that she was dead! Words weren't needed here – the Kingdom was reality, it was happening.

And ever since Jesus strode through the shimmering dry heat of those Galilean villages, the Kingdom has been getting ever more real. This is a Kingdom where things are not as we expect, where things do not conform to our expectations and our experiences. This is a wholly new agenda. Jesus inaugurates a Kingdom where people have time for what is important and are not driven by the agendas of others, a kingdom where fear is replaced by belief, where death gives way to life. This is an agenda in which those who thought they were first, the top dogs, find that they are last and the last are made first, where swords become ploughshares, where enemies are loved and sinners receive grace. This is a kingdom where the hopeless are filled with hope, where the desperate are filled with joy, where the tormented find peace. Those who are part of this Kingdom are not forced to see things from only one perspective, but have their horizons broadened, their imaginations inspired, their minds enlarged. And all that it takes, to start with, is the bottle to say to Jesus, "*Yes, Jesus, I'll give up my agenda and the agenda forced on me by others, and I'll try yours.*" Then you'll know that death is not the end, that you will see loved ones again, and that the *shalom* of God goes on for eternity. "*Don't be afraid: just believe.*"

### **QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION**

1. It's easy to talk about not letting other people set our agenda for us, but how do we actually do that?
2. "***Just believe***"? Is that all that's needed? Why/why not? Why do you think we add so much else to this simple invitation?
3. Why do you think Jesus tells them "*not to let anyone know about this*"? How easy might that have been?
4. What part does faith play in each of these three stories (*Mark 5:1-43*)?
5. From what we've read in *Mark 1-5*, describe what the Kingdom of God is like? How can we demonstrate that in our personal and collective lives?
6. What particular thing have you learned from this story?