

26 June 2021

Accessing the Power of God (Mark 5. 21-43)

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Over the past couple of weeks, we've been exploring 'how God acts'. Today's reading confronts us with the fraught and painful question of *when* God acts and in response to whom.

In the passage we just heard, Jesus is said to have raised Jairus's daughter from death and to have healed a woman with a debilitating illness. These events amaze those who witness them and prove his tenderness and compassion. They should, it seems, provoke our rejoicing. Yet in this past week alone, I've heard the anguish of a mother whose daughter suffers chronic and seemingly intractable pain. I know another mother whose son is dying of cancer; a husband desperate for his wife's remission and relief, and an older woman suffering alone. All these are people of 'faith'. One commentator writes that this section of Mark's gospel is 'carefully constructing a picture of Jesus as a vehicle for God's power'.¹ But sometimes that picture – far from being a source of consolation and gratitude – only intensifies our experience of abandonment and of missing out. For what happens when this power seems not to be activated in our direction, when relief for *our* loved ones is not forthcoming?

As I've said, it's a fraught and painful question. Before we turn to it more fully, let me briefly recap where we've come. So far in this little series, we've explored two dimensions of divine action. We've considered its effect – what the presence and act of God characteristically produces or makes possible in the world. Two weeks ago, we saw how the parables of the sower and seeds depict this effect in terms of growth, fruitfulness, generativity; last week, the story of Jesus stilling the storm pointed to the presence of God bringing calm, peace, the settling of destructive

¹ Bonnie Bowman Thurston, *Preaching Mark* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2002), p.64.

forces and the ordering of chaos. In the story following that one, Jesus acts to liberate the Gerasene demoniac from self-alienation and exile from community. And now, in today's reading, one more effect of divine action is added to the list. Jesus is depicted as bringing healing and the restoration of wholeness.

Most obviously, this effect is shown by the curing of the haemorrhaging woman and Jairus's daughter of what ails them, but it's further emphasised in the story by the symbolism of the number 12. In the Hebrew imagination, this number represents completeness and the wholeness of God's people – the 12 tribes of Israel, the 12 apostles appointed to restore the 12 tribes, the 12 gates of heaven (Revelation 21.21). The fact that the ordeal of the woman with the haemorrhage is said to have ended after 12 years and that Jairus's daughter is brought back to life (aged 12 years) seems, then, a bit more than a coincidence. As if this story wants us to understand that divine action makes whole, restores integrity, heals what detracts from life's fullness.

The second dimension of divine action we've considered so far is the 'how' of it. I've argued that God (as conceived in the Christian tradition) does not interrupt the life of the world from the outside – does not act through a series of interventions on demand. If we think of God like this, then God becomes nothing more than a bigger version of us, and divine action becomes reactive to circumstance.² But, in Christian understanding, God is not (like us) an actor among actors, negotiating with an environment. God simply is the ever-present mercy and love on which all life depends, and God's being and act are one. The gospels suggest then that God acts only ever from the 'within' of the world God has made – like seed growing subtly and slowly, like the still-point that calms the storm. Or, as in today's passage, through Jesus' radical human presence to what is and his rootedness in God.

The significance and power of Jesus' radical presence is depicted through the interweaving of the two healing stories. In what sounds like a total pastoral care

² Rowan Williams, *Wrestling with Angels: Conversations in Modern Theology*, ed. Mike Higton (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2007), p.267.

nightmare, Jesus is urgently on his way to a little girl on the point of death when he encounters the woman with a chronic haemorrhage. Both are in desperate need. But for Jesus there seems no sense that the woman gets in the way of where he's really trying to get to, nor any sense that his care for Jairus's daughter is deflected by his care for the woman. In him, their needs are not in competition – and though, externally, events happen sequentially, one before the other, inwardly Jesus remains continuously and undistractedly present to both. For the 'steadfast love of the Lord never ceases'.

As for his rootedness in God, it's this that puts those who touch him into contact with the regenerative Source of all life. This is shown by the fact that, at the point they touch or are touched by him, both woman and girl are 'unclean'. The woman because of the 'flow of blood' which would have rendered her a social outcast; Jairus's daughter because she is dead. According to the rules, contact with their uncleanness should have made him unclean. But, in fact, the 'contagion' goes the other way – his wholeness makes them whole, his connection restores them to belonging and life. Mark goes out of his way to emphasise this point. Think of all those references to touching, drawing attention to what culturally should have been taboo. It's through contact with Jesus, that God's healing power has been communicated and their belonging recreated. Which is why, rather than rebuking the woman for her unauthorised touch, Jesus instead calls her 'Daughter' – an affectionate address that establishes her as a daughter of Abraham and a member of his own household, just as the other daughter in the story will be restored to her household, and given something to eat.

So – I've spoken of the effect of divine action on us and in the world; and the 'how' of it – from within, enabling growth, peace, healing and restoration. But what about the 'when' and in response to whom? What about those times Jesus doesn't seem to come when we call? How do we 'touch' the power of God when we need it?

Last week, I said if we give up thinking of God magically, as intervening episodically from the outside, then the only way to conceive of particular or special

divine action is in terms of the created order becoming more open to or receptive of the one continuous act of God's love.³ We might think of a particular set of circumstances, or particular openness in certain people that allows the underlying act of God to 'break through', to become manifest or incarnate in a new way. This is a picture that seems suggested by our gospel story. According to Mark, what enables Jesus to communicate healing and wholeness is the openness and receptivity of those he touches. He calls it 'faith', trust. He tells the woman who dares touch his clothes, 'Daughter, your faith has made you well'. And similarly, with Jairus whose daughter has just died, he says: 'Do not fear, only believe'. And, Mark tells us, when Jesus goes on after this to his home town, where they do not believe or trust him: 'he could do no deed of power there' (Mark 6.5). The idea seems to be that there's something in us that can open the way, or not, for God's presence and act more fully to 'break through'.

Having said this, however, we all know the dangers, indeed the abuse, that can follow this line of thought. People whose terrible suffering and grief is cruelly compounded by the implication that if you aren't healed, it's because you lack faith, you haven't been open enough to God; if your child or spouse is not cured, it's somehow your fault for not believing hard enough. And I utterly reject this view. It's abhorrent and untrue. So what are we to say? How are we to hold together the sense that (on the one hand) God's continuous act and steadfast love is ever present and wanting to manifest more fully into our lives and our world, with (on the other hand) our bitter experience of chronic or terminal illness, of pain and disability so often not yielding to cure, despite our faith and earnest prayer?

Well, I don't presume to have an 'answer' here – perhaps these are questions we can only live *with* in the hope of living into fuller truth. So let me just offer this. It seems to me that faith is fundamentally about radical entrustment – entrusting myself, entrusting those I love to God, undefendedly and beyond pretence at self-sufficiency. To do this, we must trust that God wills our good – our growth,

³ Williams, *Wrestling with Angels*, p.269.

liberation, reconciliation and fullness of life – and I believe God does. But exactly how this good manifests in particular lives at particular times, how it breaks through the risks and limits of this world, how it changes or transforms our circumstances – well, this isn't something whose form we're guaranteed. Faith is simply the choice, the stubborn willingness to stay open before God, as best we can, and come what may.

One final point. Remember *how* God's act touches the need of those in this story? It's through Jesus' radical human presence and his rootedness in love. This is the means by which healing and reconnection is communicated, made real to those who touch him. *We* are the body of Christ. The more we, like Jesus, are present to the Presence and rooted in God, the more we access the same power to communicate what he does – recognition, care, belonging, healing. We realise our part in realising the action of God – becoming, as Teresa of Avila said, God's hands and feet in the world, available as Jesus was, to visit the sick, call the lonely, bear patiently with interruption, be present as we can. In Jesus, divine action becomes incarnate in a human life; so, let our lives incarnate his.