

## The Storyteller

Mark the Evangelist is master of the breathless style of journalism, where every sentence begins with “And...”; it always evokes for me a child who can’t get the story out fast enough, and who runs all his facts into one massive sentence because he simply can’t stop. You might conclude that Mark is a primitive and artless writer. Think again!

### Two Patients

In today’s magnificent Gospel we hear two stories woven together. Both of them deeply engage us, because they speak to our own real experience. The first is the story of a little child critically ill. Immediately our hearts are unified, and we are full of anxiety. Jesus is with us: he will come at once; and the whole vast crowd begins to hurry forward as one. Now watch Mark. He skilfully introduces his second story: a woman bowed down with long, debilitating illness. She’s alone, perhaps a widow; she’s become poor because of her chronic condition, and the medics of the day, despite their helplessness, have taken their cut. She is betrayed, ruined, and hopeless. She should, by Jewish Rabbinic law, be isolated from contact with others, for she’s continually haemorrhaging, thus ritually unclean. So despite being in the thick of a crowd, she is radically *alone*. But she hasn’t come today to lose herself in a crowd. She has come to meet someone; and she hopes to meet him without his meeting her; she will touch the hem of his robe, and - who knows how? - something of his healing power may flow into her tired frame.

### “Who Touched Me?”

There are the two stories: one, a dramatic story of threatened youth: the other, a too-familiar tale of advanced decrepitude, proved to be incurable. They suddenly meet in the presence of Jesus. All at once everything stands still. The woman has made her contact; the miracle happens; she knows in herself that it has. But her plan of secrecy is blown apart. He *knows*...his eye scans the crowd, looking for the face that will tell him about need, and faith, and life restored. He

will not rush on to the next encounter, before he has fulfilled the unexpected one in the press of people. Now we are with Jairus, who is desperate and has no time for this old woman; but now she has come forward trembling, and she is launching into her life-story, and Jesus is totally halted and listening, and all the time the little one is worsening at home. She is quavering on about her symptoms, and the number of times she’s been treated, and listing her consultants, and complaining about the waiting-lists, and ....and now here come my relatives, and what are they saying? - *why do you trouble the master any further? Your daughter is dead*. It is a masterstroke: and at once Jesus reaches his side and succinctly says: *Me phobou, monon pistete* - “No fear: only believe!”- and then, in a fever of confusion, they go on together.

### One Saviour For Us All

It doesn’t matter whether our burdens have been long and progressive, or have swept down on us like a tidal wave. Mark manages to tell us this by a small detail: the woman has been compromised by haemorrhage *for twelve years*, and the little girl is *twelve years old*. These two are sisters in adversity, and the compassion of Christ is there for both of them. Jairus comes from a loving family, seeking the help of the Lord on behalf of his child. The old woman comes on her own, struggling to reach the heart of a multitude. They display the same helplessness, and the same faith. Mark is so masterful an artist, that he makes us see these different people through the eyes of Christ.

### It’s The Way He Tells Them

Matthew has none of Mark’s talent. He didn’t like the almost magical knowledge displayed by Jesus, he didn’t like the suspense in the narrative. In his zeal to eliminate these things, he spoiled the story comprehensively. So the Markan account remains in all its sensitivity and drama, one of the minor literary treasures of our faith. The Word becomes flesh in both

Gospels: but this year's Evangelist can  
sometimes make it sing. *Fr Philip*