

THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

There Was This Woman

Mark's Gospel may sometimes look a bit haphazard; but look at today's helping, and you will see how artful he is. His account of Jesus' ministry has stressed its explosive, tumultuous quality: miracles come thick and fast, punctuated by teaching which makes a huge impression of authority. Great crowds are assembling, there is a real stir in the atmosphere. People of all sorts are gathering, some from great distance, some foreigners. Many are poor, some distinguished and well-found. Jairus, who arrives today bringing an agonised plea for his desperately sick daughter, is identified as "one of the synagogue rulers".

A Sick Child

Few are unmoved by a suffering child, and Jesus responds generously, rising without words and setting out. *Then comes the woman.* She is a kind of walking disaster, and her malfunction has come to dominate her. Mark the storyteller brilliantly evokes her: laboriously he blathers away about her fruitless search among the medics (what do they know, anyway?) and what she's spent on worthless remedies (a fortune already); she is Mrs Bialystock by way of Norman Evans' *Over the Garden Wall*, and she has told the story so often that it is like a script. And all the time Mark is screwing up the tension about the little girl who, far from having a long story to relate, looks like meriting a couple of lines on a small marble stone. By the time the haemorrhaging one has finished "pouring out her whole story" surely the impatience of the reader is making the anxiety of Jairus a real presence in 2000 AD.

The Worst

The cruelty with which the messengers deliver the news of the little one's death is symbolic: *Why put the Master to any more trouble?* – as if Jesus' busy schedule is now more important than the dreadful grief of a child's death. How should we understand the relation between these two demands for Jesus' help: one, urgent and deadly, but remote: the other, long-standing, long-winded, and nearer to hand? At first, Mark seems to be inviting us to become impatient and frustrated at the interruption of the story. Yet look closer; both of the sufferers are called *daughter*; the daughter of Jairus has been alive for *twelve years*, precisely the length of time the woman has been suffering. Jairus is said to beseech the help of Jesus *repeatedly* (our Bible says *earnestly*) so that the

long quest of the woman is matched by the insistence of the father. Now they have both come together to Jesus on a single day, and both are reaching out to him with a single faith. *Your faith, he says, has healed you: only have faith.*

The Uncleaness of Evil

There is an underlying fact which we ought not to ignore. Leviticus embodies a law which prevents a woman in haemorrhage from contact with others. She is regarded as ritually unclean. Above and beyond her pain and disability, therefore, she bears the duty of seclusion from normal contact with her own people. Today, however, she decides to transgress the ritual barrier she has observed for so long: she will reach out in a crowd, and *touch* the garment of Jesus. His awareness of what has happened stresses the importance of it; *who has touched me?* marks out *one* touch as unique. In the same way, the announcement of the little girl's death means that the suggested contact with her also, now that she is a corpse, will ritually defile Jesus. Jesus' words become an amulet for us, which can encourage us in moments of disaster all our lives: *No fear – only faith!* He is no more afraid of these defilements than he was to touch the leper. On our side, as the people of Nazareth will show, there is a faithless barrier to the grace of Christ. It is a cause of joy for us that there is no such *cordon sanitaire* in the mind of the Lord.
Fr Philip