

Anglican Church Arnhem-Nijmegen – 30 June 2024
Gospel Reading: Mark 5:21 - end (Revd Wim Kuiper)

‘My soul waits for the Lord, more than the night watch for the morning.’ This verse of Psalm 130 is taken up in the Night Prayer or Compline that we use in the daily offices of our church. Those who join our Zoom prayer groups on Mondays and Tuesdays will have recognized these words. Eagerly waiting for the Lord, is also what those two very different persons did in the wonderful healing stories in today’s Gospel passage. Stories that are probably quite familiar to most of us. But when we spell them out in every detail once again on this Sunday, they may still speak to us in a surprising new way. In the particular situation where we find ourselves in today. Perhaps also struggling with our own issues around healing and wholeness, of ourselves and of our loved ones. A moment in life, when we are perhaps also eagerly waiting to meet the Lord on the road, with our own burning desires and urgent quests. Trusting that he has something for us in store as well. Part of the eternal, numerous crowd that continues to follow him. Pressing in on him, day and night.

How will he react? What will he do with all those petitions? To whom will he reach out and in what ways? What can we learn from stories like this one about his kingship, his kind of authority and the way in which he uses it, making clear the values that really count inside his kingdom? Perhaps his ways are less surprising to us, as we know him already quite well, at least we think we do. But for those who encountered him back then, in first century Palestine, and for those who first heard about him through this Gospel of Mark in the centuries afterwards, all of it must have been very surprising indeed. Jesus surely shows himself to be the Lord of surprises.

So first we hear about Jairus showing up on the road all of a sudden, falling on his knees before him. He is a leader of the synagogue, meaning one of the elite, a privileged and probably rich man. Highly regarded within his community. Strictly law abiding, so not the type of person that you would expect to show a great amount of respect for the very special authority of this new, wandering rabbi called Jesus of Nazareth. But he is in great distress because of his beloved, 12 year old daughter who is very ill, about to die. And it is this great tragedy that somehow has opened his eyes for what Jesus might have to offer him. And so he forgets all about his status and usual skepticism. He just shows himself to be a loving father, who does what he can to save the life of his daughter.

Begging Jesus on his knees to come with him to his house, trusting in his healing powers. And Jesus immediately goes with him, just like that. What a great surprise!

But then, equally sudden, there is this other very different person. A woman who has had to live in isolation. Cast out of her community because of an illness that made her unclean in the eyes of those around her. An illness that had already lasted for twelve years (again that special number we hear so often in the Bible). She is impoverished because of all the medical costs. So all in all, someone with the lowest possible social status. She should not even have come close to the crowd at all, let alone try to secretly touch Jesus. What an audacious but also unlawful plan it was to do so. Because this would make Jesus unclean as well. An act of desperation and of faith in the healing power of him. And what a surprise: it does work. Against all odds, she succeeds in touching the hem of his garment and immediately (one of Mark's favorite words) she feels that she is healed. But this is not how Jesus really works. In all the healing stories about him, we hear how he is genuinely interested in those who ask for his healing. He enters into a relationship with them by starting a conversation. And what is more, especially in this culture where staying pure was such a big issue, he does not shy away from touching them or letting himself be touched by them, as in this story. And so he has a great reassuring and affirming message for this woman when she kneels before him, trembling with fear. Calling her 'daughter' and sending her out to have a new life. Healed not only physically, but also socially, because she can now once more fully take part in the life of her community.

This interruption of the flow means that Jairus needs to wait. Jesus deliberately takes time for this woman, giving her his proper attention. And so he teaches his disciples and the crowd in general some important lessons. A lowly, poor, outcast woman is to him of equal importance as this privileged, high status and rich man. Something that may not surprise us, in our day and age, as much as those who lived in societies that are way more stratified and patriarchal than ours. When I read such a story, I always wonder what kind of sermons were preached about this not so long ago, or within different cultural settings in our time. Because it is really hard not to interpret it from a feminist perspective. Not to see, how Jesus is clearly signaling here the equal value in his eyes of every human being. A vital lesson that needs to be rediscovered by every new generation, as we tend to forget it even in our time and place. And so Jesus naturally also includes that little girl into his mission to save all. He addresses

her directly with those life giving words: 'Talitha cumi!' He even takes her by the hand, back then an absolute 'no go' as she had already passed away, so being unclean in extremis.

By these two healings, to the amazement of all, Jesus shows himself to have authority, not just over the powers of nature (as in last weeks' story of how he calmed the storm on the sea), but also over life and death. He reveals himself as the one and only Son of God, with all the authority of being the true Master of the universe. But at the same time he calls this lowliest of women 'daughter'. He calls this little girl to get up and he makes sure that she gets something to eat. It is this surprising combination of supreme authority and an inclusive loving-kindness and mercy for all, that may even continue to baffle us.

So let us wait, eagerly, for our Lord of surprises, who also calls each and every one of us to get up and to always feel restored to true wholeness in his presence, knowing that we are all God's equally beloved daughters and sons.
Amen