



Churches 4 All
Whimble - Talaton
Clyst Hydon - Clyst St Lawrence

Sermon series on 'Women in the Bible'

Week 7: An unnamed woman - The haemorrhaging woman (Mark 5:25-34)

I know you should never comment about a woman's weight, but many of the women we have looked at so far in our sermon series on 'Women in the Bible', Mary, Elizabeth, Ruth, Esther and the like, are biblical heavyweights! So, today and next week, we are going to look at two women whose names we don't know, but who nonetheless, through their encounters with Jesus, leave a legacy behind them that continues to sow love and grace and faith into the lives of others. I hope that's a great encouragement to us. I doubt that in 100 years' time most of our names will be remembered; but I hope that the seeds of love we planted are still growing and flourishing in someone, somewhere.

The first un-named woman we look at today is usually, in history, only ever labelled as 'the haemorrhaging woman'. It's not the most attractive of titles is it, to be known and labelled by your medical condition. Can you imagine, "Here he comes, Mr Athlete's foot!" "There she goes, Mrs Tennis Elbow."

There are a couple of things I notice about this encounter between Jesus and the haemorrhaging woman.

The first is that it is an interruption to what Jesus is doing. If you look at the fuller context in Mark's gospel, just prior to this episode, Jesus has been asked to heal the daughter of Jairus a synagogue leader. Jesus is on his way to Jairus's house when this episode happens. A large crowd is following him and pressing around him as he heads for Jairus's house. And then this woman comes up behind him in the crowd and touches his cloak, because she thinks to herself, "If I just touch his clothes, I will be healed."

So, Jesus is interrupted. But he accepts the interruption. If we are honest, most of us aren't good at accepting interruptions to the business we are about. We fix our agendas, make our list of things to do, tasks to complete, people to see and usually end up complaining, at least inwardly, if something interrupts us from what we had planned to do. I once saw a cartoon of a vicar in his study preparing his sermon and the doorbell kept ringing with person after person needing to see the vicar. And eventually the vicar cries out to God in desperation, 'How can I do my job with all these interruptions?' And he hears God gently reply, 'Your job is the interruptions.'

It's in the interruptions that God often breaks in. It's when our lives are interrupted, sometimes by tragedy, or disappointment, or an enforced change of direction that the power of God is able to break in and God is finally able to get our attention. This is the case of course for Jairus, who as leader of the synagogue, humbly approaches this rabbi with a reputation, accepting the higher authority of Jesus because his life has been interrupted by his daughter's illness.

So, don't ignore the interruptions. Give attention to them, in case it's God's way of intentionally drawing us away from what we are doing towards what God would have us pay attention to.

The second thing I notice is the woman's bold faith. This woman's medical condition isn't just a source of discomfort for her. Mark tells us that *'she had suffered a great deal under the care of many doctors and had spent all she had, yet instead of getting better she grew worse.'* How very fortunate we are to have the NHS, to not have to pay for healthcare at the point of delivery. In many parts of the world, this isn't the case and it certainly isn't the case in first century Palestine. So this woman is destitute, having spent everything trying to get well for twelve years.

And as if being both sick and destitute wasn't enough, she is ritually unclean according to Jewish law. She is impure. Not only that, until she is cured, her impurity is transmittable; anyone who has contact with her, by lying in her bed, or sitting in her chair or by touching her, also becomes unclean.

So, this unnamed woman is a desperate, destitute outcast, who has the faith and courage to imagine that if she can just get near enough to Jesus to touch his cloak, if she can just cling on to enough of God, in hope and faith, she will receive her healing. Clinging on to the coat-tails of God. Anyone who has ever known desperation knows that feeling. I suppose it's a case that when God is all you've got left, you discover that God is all you actually need.

And somehow she manages to get close enough to him to touch his cloak. And Jesus notices because he feels power come from his body. Jesus always notices an exercise of faith. And then there's a little comedy in the story as Jesus asks the disciples, 'Who touched my clothes?' That's like asking, 'Who touched me' in a rugby scrum?

The woman owns up and is trembling with fear before Jesus, perhaps because she realises that to be unclean as she is and to actively seek to touch another human being is a daring and serious violation of Jewish purity regulations. So she may be expecting a scolding instead of a blessing.

But, like in so many other places and stories in the gospels, Jesus doesn't seem to care a jot about her breach of the religious rules. He wants to know who she is not to rebuke her, not to embarrass the woman, but to draw attention to her faith and courage for the onlookers, and for all of us hearing the story again today, that we all together might realise what just happened. He said to her, "Daughter, *your faith* has healed you. Go in peace and be freed from your suffering."

It's her initiative, her trust in Christ's power, her courage to break the religious rules, her confidence in the steadfast love and goodness of God, her reliance on her conviction that God is for her not against her, that brings her the healing she so desperately desires. And her legacy lives on as inspiration for us.

Revd Chris Martin,

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