

Reflection for Sunday 27 June

I'll never forget the winemaker who insisted that 90% of the secret of making great wine is faith. She wasn't, I think, a person of conventional religious faith, but she did follow strict organic regime to the letter, called 'biodynamics.'

Over the years I've puzzled over her statement. Was it rather a good marketing ploy or did she really mean it? I think she did, but I came to see that it wasn't so much her belief in biodynamics that made the difference, but the secret of her success was the deeper relationship that biodynamics forced her to forge with her estate. She was able to see it differently and came to know its topography and soils with an intimacy far beyond the ordinary. She cared as deeply as anyone I've known about a piece of land and about how it might be sustained and improved. It was a relationship of love - and trust, and she was repaid with wonderfully good wine.

Christian faith, I dare to suggest, runs on much the same lines. At its heart is not a decision to assent to a series of possible truths, or even theories about how the world came into being and who's in charge, but a relationship with a real, warm, person - a relationship that makes all the difference in the world. This relationship with Jesus helps to see everything differently - and in so doing it changes everything.

The two stories given to us to reflect on today are wonderful illustrations of how this happens.

The poor woman who has suffered for twelve years, most likely from vaginal bleeding, is an outsider, in that because of her condition, for no fault of her own, she is regarded and unclean. She is forced to self-isolate.

At first reading, the healing that she receives seems almost like magic. It was commonly believed that one's clothing was an extension of one's personality - a view that many a modern fashion designer would have given their eye teeth for. All she has to do is touch Jesus's cloak and she'll be made well; but of, course, this isn't the end of the story nor its point. Jesus stops, confronts her, gently and sympathetically, and a dialogue ensues.

The suspicion of magic melts away and is replaced by a firm and real personal relationship - and in that relationship alone it is clear that her faith has made her well. St Mark does not reveal her name, but tradition has it that the deep sense of relationship persisted and that Berenice, or was it Veronica (?) went back to her home in Caesarea Philippi transformed in a way that went profoundly beyond the relief of her isolating haemorrhage.

The little girl who seems to have slipped into a coma and then, perhaps died, is less the focus of our second story than her father, who is anything but an outsider. Jairus is firmly established in the upper echelons of Jewish society. His story, as told by Mark, has many

rather touching human touches, not least the friendly, earthy, language addressed to her by Jesus. 'Tabitha cum' means literally 'lamb, get up,' but its colloquial sense is far better rendered if we can imagine Jesus saying, 'get up kid!' In other words, as Mark makes clear, the healing, maybe the resurrection, is an intimate event that takes place behind closed doors. What counts is the relationship that her father has forged with Jesus – a relation that makes even an unthinkable transformation possible.

In short, the true focus of neither of these stories is really on the healings themselves but on the faith that has, against all expectations, made them possible – and the nature of that faith is nothing more, nothing less than a willingness to enter into an open relationship with Jesus.

The remarkable nature of the two relationships that Mark celebrates is that neither is obvious or easy. One is with a woman who, in a rather uncanny link to our day, really ought to be self-isolating – if she is to obey the rules of the day and the other is with a man who in other ways stands for those who most violently and vehemently refuses to enter into any kind of meaningful dialogue with Jesus and who might be most likely to reject any claim that he possessed any form of authority. But healing relationships are always possible. Jesus erects no barriers and his love is freely given to anyone.

These two very remarkable little stories perfectly illustrates one of St Mark's main themes in writing his Gospel, which is that no-one will be impressed by miracles alone. Instead, a willingness to enter a relationship with Jesus, to have faith in him, almost makes possible the most extraordinary transformations.

St Mark writes his Gospel so that we might believe this too, and in turn come to faith in Jesus Christ so that our lives may be transformed in ways that we too might find hard to comprehend.

Faith in Jesus Christ then, has very little to do with the necessity of believing every line of the creed in a literal sense, or even in such theological red lines such as the virgin birth or the resurrection of the body. I'll not say they're wrong, but they aren't as central to faith as we might first think. Faith in Jesus Christ has, rather, everything to do with a willingness to let his story become entwined with our stories so that through his love, his generosity, his hope, his compassion and his uncompromising sense of justice we are able to see everything around us differently - in a completely new light.

Faith is a life-long journey. It sustains us in the good times and in our moments of pain, anguish and tragedy and transforms us from within. It never seeks to impose a system of belief upon us.

The secret of good wine may well be 90% faith. The secret to fulfilled (and godly) living certainly is.