

## Lent II

*“and her daughter was made whole” (Gospel)*

The Gospel is typical of the problems we often have with the New Testament. The instinctive reaction of the scholar is to ask why Mark included the incident (and why Matthew rewrote it rather than, as usual, simply shortening it and making it more formulaic). The usual answer is, to defend the Gentile mission (and yet Luke left the incident out). And then the question is raised whether any part of the incident is genuine (for nobody imagines miracles can happen!)

The normal reaction of older preachers was to put their hearers in the place of the woman – to extract, usually in accordance with their particular doctrine of justification by faith, a pattern of the Christian response to God's invitation. But this is not what the story is about. And salvation is not a miracle of healing. Let us be clear. This is a miracle story. It is about a non-Jew. Now we are familiar with ethnically cleansed territories and absolute racial and religious clarity. Jesus did not live in such a world. There were places in which Jews relatively predominated (but Galilee was not one of them). Tyre and Sidon were even less Jewish – but we might doubt how much the “people of the land” cared to be clear about either their ethnicity or their religion. (Incidentally, how silly the ethnic and religious questions in any census are. Life is not simple!)

This is a miracle story, and about human need (and God's generosity in response to that need). No miracle, no point in including the story. Not that the gospel consists solely of miracles – all the Evangelists use them sparingly. It is as if a minimum of miracles is needed to make the point that the Father was acting in and through Jesus, but the mere multiplication of miracle stories at the expense of other content would be a distortion. Indeed, often the miracle is used to make some other point, not simply for itself.

Now in this case the miracle is not the main point. We will not be wrong to notice that (in the end and with whatever hesitation) Jesus does care about people either on the edge of Judaism or quite outside it. And we will be right to give thanks that such care includes us. So far the scholar is right. In the case of Mark's version, it is as if Jesus is convinced by a witty response. Not so for Matthew. The response is retained, but is treated as an example of “faith” (we might better say trust or confidence, to avoid credal assumptions which are not expressed in the text). Now this is a major feature of Jesus and his teaching. He trusts God. If that trust is present in others, however feebly, he can act. And if not, not; “unbelief” or lack of trust is noted several times by the evangelists as inhibiting his work. This is not a hint to us to work up an emotional “trust” in God. The Gospel does not deal in feelings (manufactured or real), but in practical dispositions.

Jesus trusted his Father. That is to say, he lived and died on the basis that the relationship existed. He prayed on that basis. He taught with the authority of that relationship. That is why his miracles are possible. Is this an important clue for our discipleship? Partly, indeed. For in heaven that relationship will govern everything. So we should begin to get used to the idea.

But we know we do not sustain life like that yet – or only for brief moments. The temptation is to substitute a different approach, that of constantly begging God for that relationship, and acknowledging that we do not deserve it. Yes, we are “miserable sinners” (which means that we need God's pity), but we cannot earn it and we do not need to, for “he first loved us” and the relationship is already open to us.

Thank God for the intellectual saints, but sometimes the essentials of Christian living with God are better captured by lesser minds. I commend for study one of Faber's hymns (AMR 364 and EH 499 select different verses from it). Read it, not as saccharine but as statements of fact. This is God's treatment of us.

“If our love were but more simple,  
We should take him at his word;  
And our lives would be all sunshine  
In the sweetness of the Lord.”