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LITTLE GIRL; I SAY TO YOU; ARISE! - Biblical Commentary by Father Alberto Maggi OSM

Mark 5,21-43

And when Jesus had crossed again in the boat to the other side, a great crowd gathered about him, and he was beside the sea. Then came one of the rulers of the synagogue, Jairus by name, and seeing him, he fell at his feet and implored him earnestly, saying, "My little daughter is at the point of death. Come and lay your hands on her, so that she may be made well and live." And he went with him.

And a great crowd followed him and thronged about him. And there was a woman who had had a discharge of blood for twelve years, and who had suffered much under many physicians, and had spent all that she had, and was no better but rather grew worse. She had heard the reports about Jesus and came up behind him in the crowd and touched his garment. For she said, "If I touch even his garments, I will be made well." And immediately the flow of blood dried up, and she felt in her body that she was healed of her disease. And Jesus, perceiving in himself that power had gone out from him, immediately turned about in the crowd and said, "Who touched my garments?" And his disciples said to him, "You see the crowd pressing around you, and yet you say, 'Who touched me?'" And he looked around to see who had done it. But the woman, knowing what had happened to her, came in fear and trembling and fell down before him and told him the whole truth. And he said to her, "Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace, and be healed of your disease."

While he was still speaking, there came from the ruler's house some who said, "Your daughter is dead. Why trouble the Teacher any further?" But overhearing[e] what they said, Jesus said to the ruler of the synagogue, "Do not fear, only believe." And he allowed no one to follow him except Peter and James and John the brother of James. They came to the house of the ruler of the synagogue, and Jesus saw a commotion, people weeping and wailing loudly. And when he had entered, he said to them, "Why are you making a commotion and weeping? The child is not dead but sleeping." And they laughed at him. But he put them all outside and took the child's father and mother and those who were with him and went in where the child was. Taking her by the hand he said to her, "Talitha cumi," which means, "Little girl, I say to you, arise." And immediately the girl got up and began walking (for she was twelve years of age), and they were immediately overcome with amazement. And he strictly charged them that no one should know this, and told them to give her something to eat.

Jesus' liberating action towards his people is presented by the evangelist Mark through two female characters. It was typical of the Jewish literature to present a woman as the figure of the population. These female characters are anonymous and are united by the term daughter and by the number twelve (the age of the daughter) the number of the twelve tribes of Israel. The first is the daughter of the ruler of the synagogue, Jairus and represents the Israel dominated by laws and death. The other is an anonymous woman and represents the Israel that is excluded from the law and is dying. It is the central episode and this is what we analyze.

Mark writes "... there was a woman.." the character is anonymous and therefore represents all those who reflect themselves in this situation "...who had had a discharge of blood.." blood in the Jewish culture is life, so this discharge of blood means the loss of life and above all this discharge makes for impurity. It is a dramatic situation for the woman. The evangelist underlines that this situation has lasted twelve years, meaning the situation of the Israeli people. Why is this a dramatic situation?

A woman in that condition is unclean like a leper, she cannot be touched nor can she touch, if she is single she cannot marry and if married cannot have relations with her husband. Therefore she is condemned to be sterile and has no hope. The only one that can save her is God, but as she is unclean she cannot even turn to God.

So the evangelist represents the dramatic situation of these people that the ruthless law of religion excludes from divine action. So this woman “*..had heard the reports about Jesus..*” There had been the episode of the leper for which Jesus had shown that love is not given for the merits of the person, but for their needs. The leper had spread this message, therefore she thinks that there is hope for her. “*.. came up behind him in the crowd....*” almost hidden from him “*...and touched his garment.*” The garment means the person. Why does the woman act like this? Because she has transgressed and performed a sacrilege. She unclean has touched a man, a man of God and so transmits the impurity and this was considered such a grave action and was severely punished with death. But she has this hope.

Well the evangelist writes that “*And immediately the flow of blood dried up,*” As soon as she transgressed the law that prevented her from touching Jesus, or touching a man, as soon as she transgressed the law, she was not cursed, but blessed and found herself healed. *And Jesus, perceiving in himself that power had gone out from him, immediately turned about in the crowd and said, “Who touched my garments?”* Jesus asks to know who it was so he can finish with the healing. And here the evangelist underlines with irony how the disciples accompanying Jesus, but they do not follow him, they are with him, but they do not acknowledge the power that emanates from him. His disciples say in fact “*You see the crowd pressing around you, and yet you say, ‘Who touched me?’*” Therefore they had not understood.

But Jesus “*..looked around to see who had done it.*” so he already knew who it was “*.. the woman, knowing what had happened to her, came in fear and trembling*” why was she afraid and trembling? She does not know what Jesus’ reaction will be. She has committed a sacrilege, gone against the law, will she be severely punished? “*She fell down before him and told him the whole truth.*” It is the first time that the word truth appears in Mark’s gospel. The truth is not a doctrine or knowledge but an experience of life and freedom.

And here is Jesus’ surprise action and answer. Rather than scold this woman that would have made him unclean he turns to her with great tenderness, calls her “*Daughter,..*” the woman who had committed a sacrilege, that which in the eyes of religion is a transgression, in Jesus’ eyes is an expression of faith. Jesus says “*..your faith has made you well;*” And then rather than sending her to the temple to offer a sacrifice for the healing he sends her in peace towards the fullness of happiness She must not go to the temple anymore to offer something to God because it was God who offered himself to her and gave her salvation and life.