

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 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 in Hebrew literature to present women as a figure of the people. These female characters are anonymous and are united and by the term "*Daughter*" and especially by the number 12, for the number of the tribes of Israel. The first character is the daughter of the leader of the synagogue, of Jairus, and she represents the Israel that is subjected to the law 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, so everyone can see themselves in this situation "...*who had had a discharge of blood ..*" blood in Jewish culture is life,

so losing blood means losing life, but especially the loss of blood made her impure. This is a dramatic situation for a woman; the evangelist points out that she has been like this for twelve years, to illustrate that it is the situation of the people of Israel. Why is the situation dramatic? A woman in those conditions is unclean like a leper: she can neither touch nor be touched, if she is unmarried she certainly cannot get married and, if she is married, she cannot be touched by her husband, so she is doomed to infertility, she has no hope. The only one who could save her is of course God, but, since she is impure, she cannot turn to God. So the evangelist represents the dramatic situation of these people whom the ruthless law of religion excludes from divine action.

Well, this woman, “.. *had heard the reports about Jesus..*” there had been the episode of the leper in which Jesus had manifested that the love of God is not granted for the merits of the people, but for their needs, and the leper had spread this message, so she thinks there is hope for her too. “..*and came up behind him in the crowd..*” unknown to him, “.. *and touched his garment.*” the garment indicates the person. Why does the woman behave like this? Because she does one transgression, she commits a sacrilege, she is impure touching a man, then a man of God, then transmits impurity to him, such an action was considered a gravity and was punished severely with death, but she has this hope. Well the evangelist writes “*And immediately the flow of blood dried up,..*” As soon as she transgresses the law that prevented her from touching Jesus, from touching a man, does not put a curse on her, but a blessing, she finds herself healed.

And “..*immediately ..*” as the flow of blood stopped, Jesus also realised that a force had gone out of him, “ *he turned about in the crowd and said, “Who touched my garments?”*” Jesus’ question is not to know who, but to bring the action of salvation to completion. It’s here the evangelist underlines with irony how the disciples accompany Jesus, but do not follow him, they are with Jesus, but they do not receive the strength that emanates from him. And in fact, his disciples tell him “*You see the crowd pressing around you, and yet you say, ‘Who touched me?’*” they do not understand. But Jesus looks around to see who had done this, so he knows who it was, “.. *knowing what had happened to her, came in fear and trembling..*” why was she frightened? She doesn’t know what Jesus’ reaction will be ; she has made a sacrilege, she has broken the law, will she be severely punished? “.. *the woman, fell down before him and told him the whole truth.*” It is the only time that the term “*truth*” appears in Mark’s gospel . The truth is not a doctrine, a knowledge, but an experience of life and of freedom.

And here is the surprise response of Jesus: instead of reproaching her this woman who made him impure, addresses her with deep tenderness, calls her “*daughter*” and the woman has committed a sacrilege, which in the eyes of religion is a transgression, a sacrilege, in the eyes of Jesus it is an expression of faith, Jesus says to her “... *your faith has made you well;..*” And then, instead of sending her to the temple to offer a sacrifice for the healing, he sends her in peace towards the fullness of happiness. She no longer has to go to the temple with offerings to God : it was God who offered himself to her and gave her salvation and her life.