

Chapter 11

Jesus brought new life and health

During my second post as a junior doctor I was asked to go out to an ambulance to certify a death. This was long before ambulance crews knew how to set about resuscitation as paramedics do now. It was unknown for them to perform an electrocardiogram and death was certified by absence of breath and pulse. If no mist appeared on a mirror held over the mouth, that person was thought to be dead. As this was state of the art at the time, I accepted what I had been told by the ambulance crew and went out, death certificate book at the ready.

The patient was a woman, and although not obviously breathing, the important thing was that she was blue and not yet showing the extreme pallor of death. As I listened in there was a faint heartbeat, so we rushed her to the ward and put up an intravenous drip. (There were no intensive care units then either!) Our patient eventually regained consciousness, not at all pleased that her attempt at suicide had failed. She had been resuscitated but not fully healed.

Today the ABC of emergency resuscitation is widely taught even to school children. Some might learn to recite, ‘A for checking the airway; B for artificial breathing and C for cardiac massage’, and know how to do it all. By using this ABC, a friend of mine saved the life of a young woman who had suddenly collapsed, unconscious, at their place of work. Yet Jesus did even greater things than these.

Jesus' miracles of healing.

As well as his famous feeding of five thousand with a boy's picnic lunch and afterwards illustrating his power over the forces of nature,¹ the Gospels tell of over two dozen miracles of healing, including three people whom Jesus raised from the dead. Only one of the three lay on her deathbed; one was being carried to his funeral and the third was already buried. These were no mere acts of resuscitation.^{2,3,4}

Jesus asked some of the other needy people he helped whether they believed in him before he worked the miracle and strengthened that faith.⁵ One or two were healed at a distance, at someone else's request.^{6,7} Not all were told that their sins were forgiven, but this was so with a paralysed man whose friends had lowered him down through the roof to lie in front of Jesus in a very crowded room. He was still paralysed even after hearing the words of forgiveness, but in response to those who thought it had been easy enough to say that, Jesus proved his authority both to forgive and to heal by telling the man to get up and go home. To the amazement of all, that is what he did.⁸ When Jesus healed, he attended to mind, will and spirit as well as to a sick body. The carpenter's son might even have helped to mend the roof!

Someone previously paralysed and dependant on others, who suddenly got up and walked unaided, gave a dramatic demonstration of healing without need for any more proof of Jesus' authority and power. This was also true for a man known to have been born blind – after trusting in Jesus, he could see.⁹ As a rule, these acts of healing needed no one else's involvement to complete them, although a healed leper was told to show himself to a priest.¹⁰ Unlike advanced leprosy, the early stages would be less obviously cured, but for a priest to say that this was so would allow the man back into a society freed of worry about his earlier infection.

Ward rounds with Jesus

David Stevens, an American doctor, wrote a book asking how we would feel if when we went to the doctor the brass plate on the office door said, 'Jesus, MD'. Jesus is sometimes called the Great Physician, and for good reasons. Chapter five of Mark's Gospel is rather like a PowerPoint presentation, illustrating some of his miracles. As a child I was told that the stories were like those of patients seen on different hospital wards. They give examples of the different kinds of people Jesus helped: the demented, the diseased and desperate, the dying – and even the dead. He included men and, less commonly for those days, women and children in his acts of healing. Let's follow his visits to the different 'wards' and take note of what happened there.

The men's ward

Here we find an apparently mad man (Matthew's account describes two of them). In those days – and perhaps in our own – such severely disturbed people were very much feared and shunned. I am reminded that my first training post included being on call for a psychiatric hospital full of mentally ill people. I was the lowest member of a surgical team in the nearby hospital and was sent for when a surgical opinion was needed. Feeling very inadequate, I would arrive at the other hospital to be met by a warder carrying a big bunch of keys who then took me to see the patient. Every door we came to on the way was locked, explaining the need for so many keys, and when we finally reached the right ward I was shown in and the door securely locked behind us. Few patients were really violent, but had all been declared insane, so the authorities played safe by keeping them securely shut up. On the whole, those needing my humble opinion were harmless enough, simply out of touch with reality, but suffering from something like an abscess, or bleeding from a laceration or burn. With better drug therapy most patients later went home and the hospital was closed.

The man Jesus visited was insanely violent, but was not safely locked away in a hospital. He had once been caught and chained up by others who were strong and brave enough to catch him, but with unnatural strength he had torn off the chains (and his clothes) and run away from them to live in a cemetery. There he roamed restlessly round among the tombs. He was as wild as wild could be and no one ever came near him, as he was thought to be possessed by demons. He often cut himself with stones, so what might he do to a visitor? People kept well away from him.

It must therefore have been a great surprise for him to see a boat arrive one day, and a man he had never seen before step ashore. Despite the madman's rush at him, the stranger kept walking fearlessly towards him. It was obvious that, unusually, his wild behaviour was not frightening this visitor away. When the spirits possessing him announced that this was 'Jesus, Son of the Most High God', he knelt at Jesus' feet. He was miraculously released from his wild behaviour as Jesus allowed his demons to leave him to take up residence in a herd of pigs.

The immediate change in him was amazing. Back in his right mind, and his clothes, he was happy to sit quietly, wanting to stay with his kind deliverer. Instead, Jesus told him to go home and share with others the wonderful story of how this great change had happened to him.

The women's ward

The patient was a sad woman who had suffered for twelve long years from serious blood loss (probably persistent menorrhagia). Despite spending all her savings on many and varied medical opinions, she was poorer in health as well as in purse. By now she must have been terribly anaemic and weak. The old public health and safety laws said that women like her should be considered unclean and untouchable, and among other taboos she would have been kept out of the synagogue.¹¹ Presumably the original precaution had to do with avoiding any cross-infection as the close knit community of Hebrews travelled through the wilderness. Instead, religious hardliners had since turned it into a permanent policy.

The children's ward

Mark cleverly interweaves the woman's story with that of a desperate man, hurrying to Jesus, straight from his child's bedside. The man, Jairus, was a leader of the synagogue and father of a dying twelve year old. He came to beg Jesus to come home with him and heal her. During the years that he had been taking pride in his little girl's growing strength and development, the sick woman had gradually been getting weaker. Jairus had possibly been the main person to keep her out of his synagogue. Then, horror of horrors, as he set off to take Jesus to his daughter, he saw this very woman creep up behind him and touch the edge of his garment. Now the robe would be technically unclean, yet he urgently wanted Jesus to come home with him.

Jesus had felt power go out from him as the woman touched his robe, and Jairus must have watched as the woman stepped shyly forward to explain herself. His dilemma now was whether he, as a kind of religious policeman, should ask Jesus to go and change his outer garment before bringing the woman's uncleanness into his house.

If he were to be especially strict, he could ask Jesus to stay apart for a whole day because in order to change the robe he would have had to handle it. More than one student in an operating theatre has been embarrassed by accidentally touching the surgeon's gown with an unsterile hand. The operation has then had to wait until the surgeon changed his gown. Is that what Jesus should have done?

Jairus must have decided that his fatherly concern should override any legal scruples, but as he and Jesus set off for his home, the news came that the little girl had died. Here was a final dilemma. According to another of those old health and safety rules, to visit or touch a dead person would require a period of quarantine.¹² Would Jesus still come? In fact, the story has a happy ending. Jesus did go to the bereaved home and went straight to the child's bedside. He deliberately took her hand in his and said, 'Little girl, get up.' She opened her eyes and he told her delighted parents to find her something to eat. Any contamination would be cleansed with the healing. If Jairus eventually learned the truth about Jesus' self-giving life and death, he would realise that his own decision to put love before law for his daughter's sake had been a godly one after all, for such other-centred love is the fulfilment of the law.¹³

What about today?

In all that he did Jesus gave his own energy on behalf of others. The fast pace of his life over the three years of healing, teaching, and travelling across the country on foot must sometimes have left him exhausted.¹⁴ In his humanity he experienced suffering of body, mind and spirit and this was the price he paid for healing the sicknesses and sorrows of others. Any who have similar on call rotas, such as junior doctors or young mothers, will know a little of their draining effects, but can claim his promise to be renewed by the energy that he still gives.¹⁵

The demon-possessed man, the chronically sick woman and the dead child all responded to Jesus' words of loving authority because he was who he said he was, the Son of God. They represent the types of people that many still find it hard to deal with, doctors sometimes calling them 'heart-sink' patients because of their often slow response

to treatment. Others sometimes use labels that are even more unpleasant, but Jesus showed care to all without discrimination.

The original man, woman and child of the Gospel account were isolated behind different kinds of barriers. They needed more than drugs to put them right and so, too, do today's mentally or chronically ill people. They so often feel isolated and find few health professionals really dedicated to their care. Thankfully the hospice movement has brought better understanding of the needs of dying or bereaved adults and more recently those of children. Many health professionals are learning that illness and disability are not only physical problems but people have deeper needs that must not be ignored. Those who recognise this should help others to think about how much better any of us would feel for someone's tender loving care, whatever our physical or mental state.

It was as he drew closer to them that Jesus, moved by compassion, challenged prejudice as he calmed the disturbed, cheered the downhearted, comforted the desperate and cared about those dying and bereaved. Such loving care can bring inner healing for sufferers and encouragement for their supporters, professional or otherwise. This is especially so when, as with Jesus, it is God's love at work, channelled through devoted hands.

A mother once came to see me with her boy of about ten years old who was quite clearly much delayed in his mental development. His mother obviously loved him dearly and he was smiling happily. Interested in how such children affect their families I asked if I could take his photo to use in my talks. As she agreed, his mother added, 'When you show his picture, tell them he's brought a lot of love'. Her own evident love for him was being returned with interest. In time, to keep on loving selflessly can promote affectionate two-way traffic.

For further thought

- Do you know anyone with dementia, a disability or who is dying or bereaved? What, or who, do you think may help them most?
- Would you consider taking a more active interest in their welfare?

Further resources

- Stevens D. *Jesus MD*. Grand Rapids Michigan: Zondervan, 2001.

References

1. Mark 6:45-51
2. Mark 5:22-24, 35-43
3. Luke 7:11-15
4. John 11:17-44
5. Matthew 9:27-30
6. John 4:46-53
7. Matthew 15:22-28
8. Luke 5:17-26
9. John 9:1-2, 6-11
10. Matthew 8:1-4
11. Leviticus 15:25-30
12. Numbers 19:11
13. Romans 13:10
14. Mark 4:37-38
15. 2 Corinthians 12:9

