

Our Lord's response to interruptions. Bethesda Meditation. 28 June 2009.

As you are well aware, one feature of our Lord's public ministry was that of His compassion. Indeed, as is often pointed out, all twelve occurrences of the verb 'to have compassion' in the New Testament are in the Gospels.¹ Apart from the occasions when our Lord used it – in three of His parables² – the word is only ever used to describe our Lord Himself.

But one aspect and evidence of His compassion which is easily missed is that of His reaction and response to the numerous interruptions which He faced in the course of His ministry.

A little while ago, I came across the following question, 'What would Jesus' ministry have looked like if He had never allowed Himself to be interrupted?'³ And, when I thought about it, I realised that many of His best-known miracles and sayings flowed from what we can only call 'interruptions'.⁴

We could think, for example, of the very many occasions when people were 'brought' to Him – 'brought to Him', I note, not 'invited by Him'.

Sometimes *large numbers* were brought to Him. Matthew records three such occasions. First, in chapter 4, 'His fame went throughout all Syria; and they *brought to Him* all sick people ... and those who were demon-possessed'.⁵ Then in chapter 8, 'When evening had come, they (the men of Capernaum now) *brought to Him* many who were demon-possessed ... He cast out the spirits with a word, and healed all who were sick'.⁶ And thirdly, in chapter 14, 'they came to the land of Gennesaret ... when the men of that place recognized Him, they ... *brought to Him* all who were sick'.⁷

Leaving aside the instance, of which Matthew also speaks, when very young children were *brought to Jesus* that He might pray over them⁸ we read of several cases where individuals were brought to Him. Matthew opens and closes his ninth chapter by writing of two such: first, 'behold, they *brought to Him* a paralytic lying on a bed' – interrupting, of course, our Lord's teaching that day in the house at Capernaum – and then, 'behold, they *brought to Him* a man, mute and demon-possessed'.⁹ He records later that, 'one was *brought to Him* who was demon-possessed, blind and mute'.¹⁰ And, for his part, Mark tells us of the man at the foot of the so-called Mount of Transfiguration, who answered Jesus, 'Teacher, I *brought you* my son, who has a mute spirit ...'.¹¹

Jesus once said, 'Whoever comes to me, I will never cast out' – where the 'out' is doubled up in the Greek; 'I will never cast out out'.¹² And Jesus not only *emphasised* it – He *meant* it.

But the two best-known cases of our Lord responding graciously to interruptions are undoubtedly those of the so-called 'Feeding of the 5,000', and the healing of the woman with the issue (the flow) of blood.

The first three gospels fill in the background to the miraculous feeding of the multitude. Matthew focuses on the recent death of John the Baptist. After Herod Antipas 'had John beheaded in prison', Matthew says, John's disciples, having buried the Baptist's body 'went and told Jesus. When Jesus heard it, He departed from there by boat to a deserted place ...'.¹³ Both Mark and Luke associate our Lord's departure rather with the return of the apostles from their recent mission. 'The apostles gathered to Jesus', Mark says, 'and told Him all things, both what they had done and what they had taught', adding that 'there were many coming and going, and they did not even have time to eat'.¹⁴ The constant streams of people arriving and departing left no interval for our Lord and His disciples to partake of any food.

Small wonder that, faced with this combination of circumstances, our Lord sought quiet reflection and rest. 'Come away by yourselves into a desert place, and rest a while', were His words.¹⁵ And so He and they left by boat for the seclusion of Bethsaida on the north-east shore of Galilee.¹⁶

But it was not to be. For the crowds they left on the shore, realizing where Jesus and the apostles were heading, ran 'on foot' around the top of the lake.¹⁷ And, although they left after the boat had, they arrived at Bethsaida first, and were already there to meet Him when He landed with His tired disciples. And His reaction? Not, as might have been expected from any other, that of annoyance and irritation. But, as both Matthew and Mark note, that of 'compassion'¹⁸ – compassion, please, on those who had so rudely invaded His privacy! Following which He not only taught them (Mark¹⁹) and healed their sick (Luke²⁰) but, when it grew late, He treated them all to a satisfying meal²¹ – providing at the same time twelve hand-baskets of unused fragments, doubtless for the benefit of twelve disciples who had been unable to eat before.²² What a wonderfully thoughtful and considerate Saviour we have!

I said that the second well known case of the Lord Jesus responding graciously to interruptions was that of the healing of the woman with the flow of blood.

This was, of course, the time when He performed one miracle when on the way to perform another. By 'another', I refer of course to the raising of Jairus's daughter. Luke in particular intertwines these two case studies, drawing attention, on the one hand, to a man who would gladly have given all he had to hold on to something he had

enjoyed for 12 years – his only daughter – and, on the other hand, to a woman who had already spent all she had in an attempt to rid herself of something she had endured for 12 years.²³

For, when our Lord had returned from a previous journey across the Sea of Galilee,²⁴ a multitude had stood on the shore to welcome Him.²⁵ And no one awaited His return more eagerly than the local synagogue ruler.²⁶

His (Jairus's) heartache was his daughter – then, by Jewish reckoning, no longer a child, having reached marriageable age. But who, alas for her and her parents, far from facing the prospect of ever marrying, lay at home, as Jairus said, 'at the point of death'.²⁷

In response to his plea, 'Come and lay your hands on her, that she may be healed', the Saviour 'went with him'. But then came what was to Jairus the disastrous interruption. For on the way to his house, a woman with a hopeless medical condition unintentionally delayed them – a woman who had, Mark says, 'suffered many things from many physicians ... had spent all that she had and was no better, but rather grew worse' – her ailment having drained not only all her energy but all her savings.²⁸ Approaching Jesus from behind, she reached out in faith to touch His garment.²⁹ Immediately sensing that power had gone out from Him, Jesus turned and enquired who had touched Him – touched Him, that is, in more than the casual and superficial manner of the crowd which thronged Him.³⁰

Back at the close of Luke 7, the burning question in the house of Simon the Pharisee had been whether or not the Lord could discern the character of another woman who ventured to touch Him – that she was, as Simon considered her, a notorious sinner. Here at the close of chapter 8, the question was whether the Lord would detect, not this woman's sin, but her faith – which had prompted her to draw on His power. 'Daughter, your faith has made you well', He said, 'go in peace'.³¹ Which no doubt she did. But this interruption and delay brought Jairus anything but peace. For at that very moment, messengers arrived to inform him that his daughter had now died.³² But then we all know the happy sequel – that, with His touch³³ and His word, Jesus delivered the young girl, not from dying, but from death itself.

It is clear from the gospel narratives that our Lord often knew what it was to be busy – indeed, to be very busy.³⁴ But it is equally clear that Jesus was never too busy to allow Himself to be interrupted, and that He always responded graciously – never conveying the impression that people had no right to intrude on His time.

As far as I know, the last incident when the Saviour displayed this grace concerned a blind beggar – a stranger not only to the *benefits of wealth* but to the *beauties of nature*. On that spring day when our Lord left Bartimaeus's home town of Jericho, the gardens in 'the city of palms' would have been a blaze of colour, with the Jordan valley and majestic hills of Moab clearly visible in the distance. But what were all these glorious sights to a man who couldn't see? Couldn't see, that is, until contrary to the expectation of the crowd, Jesus 'stood still'.

Even more remarkable than the day when the sun stood still in response to the voice of a valiant man in Joshua 10 was this moment when the Son of God stood still in response to the cry³⁵ of a penniless blind man in Mark 10. For, in truth, our Lord's journey had begun in heaven and the end was now in sight. For Jerusalem was only some 15 miles away, and in seven or eight days time He would be crucified there. There had never been a more important journey than this, nor a more important time than now. And yet the prayer of a blind beggar stopped Him. And for one brief moment, our Lord, 'moved with compassion', as Matthew says,³⁶ looked into two sightless eyes, touched them, spoke His commanding word – and, lo, Bartimaeus could see ... could see the staring crowd, the palm trees of Jericho, the hills of Moab, the road to Jerusalem, and, best of all, could see the face of Jesus.

Truly, as we said, 'Jesus was never too busy to allow Himself to be interrupted'. And yet here at Jericho – as often before – He did not allow this interruption to deter or deflect Him from His chosen way³⁷ – in this case from fulfilling the purpose for which He had entered the world – and which we have met together this morning to proclaim.

What a glorious – what a beautiful – Saviour!

Footnotes

- ¹ It is used with the sense to be merciful just once in the Septuagint. This is Proverbs 17. 5 ('but he that has compassion shall find mercy'), to which there is no equivalent in the Hebrew text. It also appears several times in 'The Testaments of the twelve Patriarchs', which is probably an early Christian composition. See <http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/info/patriarchs.html>.
- ² Matt. 18. 27; Luke 10. 33; Luke 15. 20.
- ³ John Ortberg, '*God is closer than you think*', page 79.
- ⁴ Lee Fisher, long-time associate of evangelist Billy Graham, tells of a time when Mr. Graham was preaching on Trans World Radio through his German interpreter, Peter Schneider. All went well, except for a listener in Cologne, Germany, who wrote to complain. She said that she was impressed with Billy Graham's power and authority. 'But there is one thing wrong', she stated. 'There's a man speaking English who keeps interrupting him!' Lee Fisher, *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Crusade* (Carol Stream, IL: Creation House, 1974), page 28.
- ⁵ Matt. 4. 24.
- ⁶ Matt. 8. 16.
- ⁷ Matt. 14. 34-35.
- ⁸ Matt. 19. 13-15.
- ⁹ Matt. 9. 2, 32.
- ¹⁰ Matt. 12. 22.
- ¹¹ Mark 9. 17.
- ¹² John 6. 37.
- ¹³ Matt. 14. 10-13.
- ¹⁴ Mark 6. 30-31; compare Luke 9. 10.
- ¹⁵ Mark 6. 31.
- ¹⁶ Luke 9. 10.
- ¹⁷ Presumably crossing the upper Jordan at a ford two miles north of where the river enters Galilee.
- ¹⁸ Matt. 14. 14; Mark 6. 34.
- ¹⁹ Mark 6. 34.
- ²⁰ Luke 9. 11.
- ²¹ Mark 6. 42.
- ²² Mark 6. 43 with verse 31.
- ²³ Luke 8. 42-43.
- ²⁴ Then to the country of the Gergasenes, Luke 8. 26, 37.
- ²⁵ Luke 8. 40.
- ²⁶ The 'ruler' was the official in charge of the arrangements for the various synagogue services. He wasn't the attendant who did the actual work, Luke 4. 20. His duties included conducting the synagogue worship and selecting those who were to lead the prayer, read the scriptures, and teach in the service.
- ²⁷ Mark 5. 23.
- ²⁸ Mark 5. 25-26; compare **Dr.** Luke's version in Luke 8. 43.
- ²⁹ Mark 5. 27-28.
- ³⁰ Luke 8. 45.
- ³¹ Luke 8. 48.
- ³² Mark 5. 35.
- ³³ 'He took the child by the hand, and said to her, "Talitha, cumi", which is translated, "Little girl, I say to you, arise". For any ordinary Jew to have had physical contact either with a woman with a flow of blood or with a dead body would have meant instant defilement, Lev. 15. 19; Num. 19. 11.
- ³⁴ There are whole sections of the second gospel which, on account of Mark's constant use of the word 'immediately', leave the reader rather breathless.
- ³⁵ Loud and persistent!
- ³⁶ Matt. 20. 34.
- ³⁷ For example, after healing the woman with the flow of blood, Jesus went on to raise the daughter of Jairus.