

Who and what should come first?

The New Testament¹ describes a day when Jesus faced competing healthcare demands. A synagogue ruler named Jairus asks him to hurry to the deathbed of his 12-year-old daughter, believing that if Jesus gets there in time she will be healed. On the way, a woman with heavy vaginal bleeding for 12 years touches his cloak and is healed. A discussion with Jesus ensues, ending with him commending her for her faith, but during this delay, news comes of the girl's death. Jesus goes anyway, and raises her from the dead.

Simon Steer comments on the principles and encouragements this passage holds for health professionals under pressure.

'I feel pulled in so many directions. Today I needed to be in several places at once. It's so hard working out who and what should come first.' My wife was reflecting on another fairly typical day in her work as an NHS speech therapist. Listening to her responses to my 'How did it go today?' these past couple of years has been quite an education. The world of conflicting healthcare demands is now partly my world as well. Many jobs involve balancing priorities but the task seems particularly challenging when the goods at stake are people's health and even their lives.

Thinking about my wife's experience has given me a new appreciation for the biblical incidents described. It's a remarkable story about Jesus being faced with a conflict of demands in healthcare provision. While the episode does not give us a model to be imitated slavishly, it does suggest a pattern of response from which we may be able to draw important principles and encouragement in our own situations.

As is common in Mark's Gospel, the passage tells two stories, with one interposed in the middle of the other. This brings them into a relationship of 'compare and contrast', thereby providing the narrative with a cutting edge. I have been greatly helped in my appreciation of this story by the little book *Mark at Work* by John Davies and John Vincent².

In the inner story, the woman is in a continual and chronic state of haemorrhage, a constant menstruation. She is not only unwell but unclean according to Jewish law, excluded from the community - the religious purity of the respectable requires that the woman be ostracised. And whose job is it to ensure that the rules are kept and the woman excluded? It is Jairus', the ruler of the synagogue. These two individuals whose interests are fundamentally incompatible are brought face to face in the presence of Jesus. Davies and Vincent point out some fascinating contrasts between the two:

Jairus	The woman
He is in authority in the religious system	She is a victim of the religious system
He is a person of privilege in the culture	She is rejected by the culture
He is named	She is anonymous

He is male, father, surrounded by family

She is female, isolated, with no support

He is a public person who makes a public request, but gets healing in private

She is a private person who makes a secretive approach, but gets healing in public

There are also striking differences between the two patients:

The daughter of Jairus

The woman

She is 12 years old

She has been losing lifeblood for 12 years

She is an acute emergency

Her condition is chronic

She is at the age of starting to be menstrual

She is continuously menstrual

She, the daughter of privilege, has to wait for Jesus' attention

She, the outsider interrupts and Jesus attends to her first

She is restored to a place in the sharing of food in the household

She is restored to a place in the 'shalom', the peace and justice of God

What are some of the principles emerging from this Jesus-encounter that we might apply to our own contexts of competing demands?

1. Give priority to the poor and marginalised

The person on the margins of society is given priority. As Christians we are to reflect God's particular concern for the poor, the oppressed, the socially excluded. It is 'the least of these' who should be at the top of the list to receive healthcare.

2. Emphasise our unity before God

The privileged and the unprivileged become part of what Davies and Vincent call 'a common fellowship of the healed'. As Christians we must emphasise that 'we are in this together' and that the gospel breaks down socio-economic barriers. Christian prayer and healing ministries can be an effective means of emphasising our unity before God.

3. Pursue holistic healthcare

Jesus provides a model of holistic medicine. Physical healing is insufficient; there is a spiritual and a communal dimension. The woman must be affirmed in her faith and incorporated into the community; the girl must be nourished physically and relationally.

4. Be confident that God is with us

We worship a God who has, in Jesus Christ, experienced the challenges of multiple needs and competing demands. We can, therefore, face the challenges of our own professional lives in the power of the Spirit, in the presence of Christ who has been there before us.

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References

1. Mark 5:21-43
2. Davies J and Vincent J. *Mark at Work*. BRF 1986