

13th Sunday in Ordinary Time. Ben Frie SJ

When is a person alive, when does he or she die? Medical science confronts us with that question, when we have to decide whether the devices that keep someone alive should be turned off - or not. People can be seriously affected by disease, and even then the question is: what is the quality of life here? And people who appear to be alive can be inwardly dead, because of all that they have been through and could not cope with.

The triptych that Mark shows us today takes place on the edge between life and death. The first part of the triptych is about a girl of 12 and her worried father. He is the leader of the synagogue, a pastor, or a deacon so to speak. Could he have raised his daughter too strictly that, as she grows up, she no longer feels like living? Is she suffering from anorexia? Certainly, the father is afraid of losing her. "Come and lay hands on her," a gesture we still make to pass on to people the good spirit of God.

Then in the triptych comes a large center panel: a woman who had been suffering from hemorrhage for 12 years. So also 12 years, so also ready for a new phase of life. The haemorrhage made you unclean and therefore you were socially excluded and as good as dead. She gave all her power to be allowed to live. All in vain; she has only one way out: Jesus. Hopefully unnoticed in the midst of the crowd, like pickpockets operating, just touching Him, that should be enough. And it is.

The third part of the triptych takes us to the house of Jairus, where people already assume that the girl will not get any part of life. The historic words of the unflappable Jesus, "Girl, get up. It is the same word used for the resurrection, for the resurrection. And it is there in Aramean, which means we can be almost certain that they are really words spoken by Jesus himself.

Is Mark trying to show us Jesus as a miracle worker? Frankly, I think Mark is showing us ourselves: people struggling with life and death and wondering: what is God doing to us? Is He allowing us to live?

It is not God who made death, we heard in the book of Wisdom, but there are evil forces within us, such as envy and jealousy, that can become a killing force. The madness of killing tourists on a beach, or praying groups of people. There are twisted minds who believe that God Himself commands them to inflict deadly destruction to force people into an attitude of faith.

Jairus has a different attitude: 'Come and lay hands on her any-way'. Jairus asks for life for his little daughter, but the question is open. He does not use violence. The woman trusts in the slightest: if only I can touch his clothes, unnoticed. She makes no show of it, shuns all media attention and hopes for Jesus.

How do we approach God when we are struggling, or in mortal danger? Are we then like bigots, or do we continue to realize that our life is in God's hand, that it is a gift that we should live with as best we can? And if life takes a different turn than we would like, can we accept as adults that we cannot control our lives?

God created man for immortality, we read in the book of Wisdom. We may live with the experience, that our life has a great depth that is not affected by illness or death. Even when we see the limit and death approaches us, the realization that we are timeless can help us. The love that makes us live does not die. Even though life has affected us, we have a great opportunity to live. We can make something of our lives, once more if we dare to believe that divine life is granted to us.

Sometimes someone shows the power of a life lived in faith. It can be the joy that awakens faith, or the wisdom. Those who remain aware of the sustaining and life-giving power of God in all circumstances - even if the crowd of non-believers pushes in from all sides - can deal better with the setbacks, the illnesses, the nasty news of our world than if we did not know about faith.

And then God is not a magician, but a guarantee of life. 'Do not be afraid, keep on believing,' says Jesus. Don't let life be taken away from you.