

1<sup>st</sup> November 2015

Matthew 9: 20 -22

Jenny Walpole

### **The woman subject to bleeding**

Two nights ago I saw the film Suffragette and was confronted with a reminder about women's rights and the way history has viewed women as second class citizens. To abolish this myth people have had to fight – fight long, hard battles, with violence, with sacrifice and even wrestle with their own consciences about their place in the world, their place in their own lives and homes. Suffragette is a brilliant film and I whole heartedly recommend it if you haven't seen it already. Just before the rolling credits there is a reminder about the dates in which different countries allowed voting rights for women: in the UK 1918 some women over 30 were allowed to vote, Asian and African countries did not pass women's suffrage until after World War I. Late adopters in Europe included France in 1944 and Switzerland in 1971. In Saudi Arabia it is only this year that women are allowed to vote and run in local elections.

So what has that got to do with the bible reading today 'the woman subject to bleeding?'

The woman of our story today had some kind of menstrual disorder that had proved incurable by medical means. It would have put her in a constant state of ritual defilement. This condition would have made her an outcast, as she would defile anyone with whom she came into contact with, even if they only touched something that she had handled. Every woman would have known what it was to be unclean for one week in the month, but this woman had been bleeding for 12 years, this would presumably have made her unwell, physically, emotionally. She would have been like a ghost in her own home, there and yet not fully there. She could not have been touched by her husband, was an outcast in society. She could not share in the annual worship celebrations which were so important in Judaism. She could not go into the temple court, light the evening candles or participate in the Passover meal.

The implication of her touching Jesus, defiling a rabbi who was unaware of her presence – this was committing an act. This is why when she was challenged by Jesus (as we read in the gospels of Mark and Luke) that she trembled with fear.

She would have sensed something of her own uncleanness, and expecting that her touch would have been disgusting to him.

But Jesus instead of blame – commends her for her faith. This miracle would have been unconventional and shocking. The Jewish society was strongly conditioned by menstrual taboo – which was taken to be the result of God’s curse on Eve in Genesis.

The curse of Eve has been used to justify the worst excesses of patriarchy and contributed to lodging in the minds of countless women a belief in the badness of their own body and the moral inferiority of their sex.

The healing of the woman subject to bleeding illustrates Jesus’s willingness to welcome, embrace and include those who were ‘non-kosher’ the categories of people who were excluded by the prejudices and taboos of His own society such as tax collectors, lepers, Samaritans, people with deformities, people who were unclean, these people who according to Leviticus were supposedly hateful in God’s sight. But instead Jesus declares them to be in God’s special care.

This is a radical healing and a radical sign of inclusion that I think has repercussions not only for women and hidden woman but for many other people who can take from this story the power of God to heal and to restore and to declare worthy those who others regard as unworthy.

This miracle has a greater universal significance than the story of one individual. We are shown that Jesus overturned the menstrual taboo which oppressed women – a taboo that still contributes today to the oppression of women in many parts of the world and even in some parts of the church. But the implication of this miracle is nothing less than revolutionary for half the human race. It challenges the church to assess its own treatment of women as powerfully as Jesus challenged the conventions of his own time. The cruel, irrational taboo about menstruation, with all its dark, destructive implications for women down the centuries was cancelled in a few words ‘take heart daughter, your faith has healed you’. Alas it has taken the Church twenty centuries to notice.

In 2010 I heard the Dean of St Albans speak on this gospel in and used it to illustrate the churches treatment of gay people who want to come to Jesus but feel they must remain hidden in congregations or excluded from full participation in church life.

This woman knew in her heart that if she could just touch Jesus's garment, she would be healed. She set out to do it. So often we hear a little voice inside of us telling something. Perhaps it is an instinctive feeling something is ok, that you or someone you know is accepted, loved, and embraced by God despite the opposing views that surround us.

There was a background to this story in Jesus's time – to do with contamination, uncleanness, menstrual blood was viewed with suspicion and distrust which was then reflected onto woman themselves which reinforced the relative value of women compared to that men.

And so it is striking to hear of Jesus's untroubled reaction to this woman's touch. It did not contaminate Jesus – rather a release of spiritual power flowed from Jesus that actually cleansed her and the result was not only healing but full inclusion back into her own life. Included in the temple, accepted by society, and present again in her own home.

I like the fact that this woman tried to remain hidden. She didn't advertise her presence. Yet her private faith heals her and Jesus publically declares this. The woman's inner healing and faith had left a private and personal realm she is now a world famous witness to the power of Jesus. The woman in being blessed became a blessing to many. Her story is told in three gospels, I think we know this story well – perhaps more so than some of the stories of hidden lives that we have explored in this series.

Jesus did not have a magic cloak. It was her response to the person of Jesus that made her well. She approached from behind Jesus but the result was a personal confrontation, Jesus himself implies a personal relationship and addresses her as 'daughter'. Yet this story moves from beyond the individual to become symbolic for many who find healing and wholeness and restoration in the widest sense by entering into a relationship with Jesus. I shall end with a poem from Jeffrey John's book *The Meaning in the Miracles* by Miriam Therese Winter:

When a young girl bleeds in a woman's way,  
she refrains from Eucharist  
in Ghana, I am told.

When a woman bleeds  
on days she is between  
the months she is with child,  
she cooks and eats her meals apart  
because she is defiled,  
so several wives for the man you see  
are a practical necessity,  
a tradition from of old.

Jesus,  
the blood of the woman who bled  
mingles with the blood you shed,  
as a sign of contradiction,  
for it has been revealed:  
who touches the hem of your justice  
absolutely will be healed,  
but not without crucifixion.  
Now what will it take to stop  
to stop the flood  
of discrimination  
associated with blood?