

# **Brancepeth Sermon: The Word of Life**

## **Fifth Sunday after Trinity**

**Mike Higton**

Wisdom of Solomon 1:13–15, 2:23–24

Psalm 30

2 Corinthians 8:7–end

Mark 5:21–end

*Open our ears, O Lord, to hear your word and know your voice.*

*Speak to our hearts and strengthen our wills,*

*that we may serve you today and always. Amen*

I want you to imagine yourself

into a small and crowded room, on a hot day.

It's the room at the end of the gospel reading

we've just heard –

a dark and airless room in the house of Jairus,

a leader from the local synagogue.

He's not one of the high and mighty:  
a synagogue official in one of the small towns round Galilee  
isn't going to have lived like a prince.  
So, yes, picture a small room.

This is the room in which his daughter had,  
until just a little while earlier,  
been being watched and cared for –  
it has been a sickroom,  
the room in which she was lying on her sickbed,  
which has now become her death bed.

And it's only a few minutes since  
the sound of her breathing stopped.

Although the crowd of mourners,  
family and friends who were gathering  
to mark the onset of grief in the traditional way,  
with loud wailing  
– although that crowd has been peremptorily shooed away,  
this little room is still crowded.

Peter, James and John – Jesus’ closest disciples – are there,  
watching to see what their master will do,  
but with nothing to do themselves but watch.

No doubt awkward and uncertain,

even under their expectancy:

this isn’t a room they should be in,

local fishermen crowding in on someone else’s grief.

The father and the mother are there,

though they might have wanted nothing more

at this moment then to be left alone with their little girl,

to say goodbye.

Jairus missed the moment when his daughter died:

he was out on his badly timed errand to Jesus,

he was being driven to distraction as Jesus

allowed himself to be delayed by someone else’s need –

and he missed the moment,

he had to hear about it second hand.

He's back with his wife now, but he's not given any space,  
any time to talk with her, to weep with her.

The room is too crowded.

And Jesus is there; he's insisted on coming in,  
overridden the objections of those outside  
who thought he was talking nonsense,  
that he was playing foolish games with the parents' grief.

Jairus and his wife don't really know  
what kind of man this Jesus is,  
though he's accompanied these days by crowds,  
and by stories.

After all, it's one thing to rush off  
to try to get hold of the local wonder-worker  
as one last ditch attempt to make your sick daughter well,  
to stop what you can see is coming –  
it's quite another to have him and his henchmen  
crowded here into the room now that she's dead.

And then there's the girl – we don't know her name –  
lying dead on her bed.

What happens next, played out in this small room,  
is very intimate –  
a little micro-drama of human interaction.

There are no special effects.

There's no swelling music,  
no sudden silence as all the universe holds its breath,  
no glare of light,  
no angels descending and ascending.

The world keeps on going outside the room –  
and all that happens here is a *touch*,  
and a *word*.

Jesus reaches out, and takes the girl's cooling hand.

And he says,

'Little girl, get up.'

That's all.

Something about this struck the disciples, *hard*.

In later years, they would recall lots of things that Jesus said,  
even things he said in intense moments like this,  
but they'd be happy enough to translate them all into Greek,  
once they were in contexts  
where that was the main language.

But here, as in just one or two other places,  
they kept on remembering the original Aramaic,  
the language Jesus himself had spoken:

*Talitha cum.*

Very ordinary words, simple words,  
but they remembered them almost as if they were  
an *incantation*  
a *word of power*.

They clung on to the very syllables Jesus had spoken:

*Talitha cum.*

Because the girl got up.

Jesus' words recalled her to life.

He held her hand, he spoke to her,  
and this girl, dead in this small room at twelve years of age,  
got up.

Jesus spoke, and she lived.

No wonder the disciples remembered the words.

No wonder they got passed on unchanged,  
until they were written down.

Jesus spoke, and this *young girl lived*.

This was one of those occasions when Jesus did  
what the disciples expected God to do.

They knew their scriptures.

They knew that when God spoke,  
God's word called the world into being,

God's word established covenants,

God's word forgave people for their sins,

God's word healed,

God's word *gave life*.

And now Jesus spoke, and these same things happened.

That's at the heart of all their later claims about

just who this Jesus is.

They recognised that the living and active word of God

was now right here amongst them in a new way,

here in the form of an ordinary human life.

This Jesus, their master,

was not simply someone who told them about,

warned them about,

or pointed them towards what God was doing.

No:

God's word was speaking *directly* through him.

He said, 'Let there be life', and there was life.

That's what was happening in this small room,  
in this intimate drama.

In the touch, in the voice,  
in Jesus' concern immediately afterwards  
that they give the girl some food.

Right in the midst of this drama,  
he *spoke*,  
– and she *lived*.

Somehow, the word that gives life –  
the word of God, the word that made all things,  
the word that holds the whole world in being –  
was spoken through him, in this small room,  
in quiet syllables that they could hear:

*Talitha Cum.*

This was God's word, sounding in the midst of ordinary life,  
right here in the heart of a local human drama.

Jesus spoke, and the girl lived.

The disciples didn't take away from this  
the message that no one need die any more.

They didn't take away the message that  
all illnesses would be stopped,  
all grief done away with.

They didn't say that, from now on,  
life would be all miracles  
for those who knew how to ask.

They took this one, wonderful event –  
and others like it, in the days that followed –  
as *signs*.

Good in themselves, yes,  
little detonations of joy and amazement –  
but *signs*, events that *pointed* to something deeper.

People still die, grief still comes.

Illness still has its way.

But our God is a God of life, and he speaks to us –  
right here in the midst of our lives,

right in the rooms where we are being forced to face  
illness and grief,  
worry and despair,  
loss and disappointment –  
he speaks his promise to us, in the voice of Jesus.

The disciples already knew what we heard read just now  
in those words from the Wisdom of Solomon,  
that their God, *our* God, is not a God of death.

God made the world for *life*; for health and wholeness.

God made us to share God's own life,  
to be with God forever.

God is no lover of death.

Our God is a God of life,  
and so sickness and death,

the breakdowns of health and of relationships –  
*they won't be allowed the last word.*

God's word is the word that made the world *for life*;  
it's the word that will call the world to its end  
in life with God –  
and it's that same word that now sounds, intimately,  
right in the world's midst,  
in rooms like the room of Jairus' daughter.

*Talitha Cum* –

little child, stand up.

That word is spoken *here*. It is spoken to each of us.

Sometimes,

it might mean that something extraordinary happens –  
a sickness reversed, a new lease of life,  
a broken situation healed in ways that take us by surprise,  
life rushing in from left field.

I *do* believe in miracles.

But *if* that happens, *when* that happens,

it's never the whole story.

It's always a sign of something deeper –

and the deeper truth is there even in the absence of miracles,  
even when healing doesn't come,  
even when death snatches people away.

The deeper story is always God's promise  
that death *will not have the last word*.

That he will restore us to life.

That can happen partially, imperfectly, in the here and now  
– in ways we can't always imagine, can't see, can't expect,  
bringing new life to us after grief and ill health  
and the breakdown of relationships.

A girl restored to life, though she will die again.

An illness in abeyance, new strength and hope – for a time.

A returning of colour and animation  
after a long season of grief,  
though grief will come again.

Or in other ways:

A turn of the tide against tyranny, against cruelty,  
against our nation's complicity in torture,  
against the separation of immigrant families –  
however grudging and partial the remission.

Life does break out against death, again and again.

And it's right that we long for these things,  
pray for these things,  
work for these things,  
and thank God when they come.

But these things, good in themselves,  
*so* good and important in themselves,  
are also echoes in advance of  
something that will happen more fully in God's own time.

Our God is a God of life,  
and God does not, God will not, God cannot  
allow death the last word.

Our God is a God of  
the promised land after wilderness wandering,  
of return after exile,  
of resurrection after crucifixion.

So I'm not asking you to look out for special effects,  
to listen for the swelling music or the sudden hush,  
to look for the flare of light or to feel  
the blast of rushing air.

Instead, I'm asking you to listen for the voice.

The touch of a hand, and a still small voice that says

*Talitha cum:*

'Stand up, little one. This passing suffering –  
this is not all that there is.

I made you for *life*.'

*Amen.*