

Sermon
Therfield Chapel
9th February 2009
Mark 2:1-12

Tonight we find Jesus in Capernaum

Capernaum was in the region of Galilee – on the shores of the Lake and about 15 miles north east of Nazareth

The gospel writers inform us that after Jesus left Nazareth he itinerated out of Capernaum and so in some ways it became his home – in fact we read that he came home in verse 1

Now we can't be sure that he was actually in his own house – although it does read like that – but in any case here we find him in a house in Capernaum

By this time Jesus' fame had spread all over the place and people were queuing up to see him

This man Jesus was like no other they'd seen before: he healed the sick, cast out demons and preached a remarkable message with authority

He was the man to see – he was the local celebrity

And so we read in verse two that there were so many people who had turned out to hear him preach that there was no room left either inside or outside the building

And then we're introduced to this man who is paralysed

Paralysis is usually caused by damage to the nervous system, the brain or the spinal cord

The man appears in the crowd and we assume that he is being carried on some kind of stretcher or special mat by four of his friends

Now we don't know much about this man

We don't know whether he was paraplegic or a quadriplegic

A paraplegic is someone who has half their body paralysed

And a quadriplegic's body is totally paralysed

We don't know whether he was born paralysed or whether his paralysis was the result of some tragic accident

Now today in our country if you're disabled the state will pay you welfare, provide you with a home and give you free medical treatment

But in first-century Israel – just like in many parts of the world today – none of those things applied

Unless you received support from your family, the chances were that if you were unable to earn a living, you would be reduced to begging on the streets

Begging is one of my earliest memories of the Kenyan city of Mombasa

Julie and I arrived on a Friday in August 1998 with a group of new teachers for the school I taught at and on the Saturday we all left the green guarded school compound and headed off for the town centre

Third world cities are always a shock to the Westerner and Mombasa was no exception

The intense heat, the open sewers, the filthy streets, the numerous starving stray dogs, the crumbling infrastructure and the clouds of black exhaust fumes chuffing out of the rusty 1960s buses and trucks

These things impact the senses powerfully – but for me it was sight of the paralysed beggars on every street corner that affected me most

Once they see a white skin, the ones who can move drag themselves along behind you pleading for money – it's all very distressing for someone fresh from the rich world

Now we don't know for certain but I would suspect that this man in our passage to be in a similar situation to those beggars in Mombasa

Whatever the case he was desperate to see Jesus – it's quite likely that he'd met people whom Jesus had healed and he himself didn't want to miss out

Perhaps his four friends had been carrying the man around trying to locate Jesus and this time they were determined to get to him

And we can only imagine that at the sight of the crowds he began to panic – perhaps he wouldn't get to see Jesus after all

There were just too many people in the way

But then someone had an idea – it was a bit crazy – but desperation makes you do things you wouldn't normally do

Most houses in Israel in New Testament times were one room constructions and had an outside set of stairs that led up to a flat roof

Why not climb onto the roof, smash a hole in the roof and lower the man in from above

It was simple lateral thinking – Plan A to carry him in had failed so think of Plan B!

And that's exactly what they did

When a seriously injured person is brought into Accident and Emergency in the country, the first thing that is done is to cut their clothes off them in order to treat their injuries

We would never cut someone else's clothes off in normal circumstances but in that situation nobody bats an eyelid

There are much greater things at stake than a few clothes

And I guess that's how these men thought about the breaking the roof

Stuff the cost; stuff the reaction of the owners of the building; stuff what people think

This was a once in the lifetime's opportunity – it was now or never

All that mattered was getting this man to Jesus

Now let's imagine the situation inside the building

Jesus is teaching

There are people everywhere

And all of sudden they hear digging and banging

And tiles and masonry and dust and earth start falling down from the ceiling

And soon the warm sun's rays are lighting up the room and four men are peering down at them

I don't know whether Jesus stopped teaching but I doubt if few of them were listening to him by that time

And then a man is lowered down on a mat (probably with straps attached to each corner)

I guess his decent was fairly disordered and undignified

But soon he was lying at Jesus' feet

It was all quite a drama

And then Jesus spoke

We read in verse five “. ⁵When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, "Son, your sins are forgiven."

Now what do you think the man felt when he heard these words?

I suspect that he felt cheated and bitterly disappointed

He hadn't broken through a roof to have his sins forgiven

Perhaps he felt we do when we open a present at Christmas, expecting to get one thing and actually getting something else that we don't want¹

You can almost hear him say, "Err, - my sins – they're not my problem. My problem is with my legs"

And that brings us to our first lesson

Jesus' words in some ways remind us of the deepest need of every human being – our need to have our sins forgiven by God

This man had a problem; he was paralysed

It's a terrible thing to be in such a condition – more terrible than I as an able-bodied person can ever imagine

And – as we shall see in a minute - Jesus resolves that problem and addresses his physical need

But first Jesus tackles a greater problem that the man had

For the fact is that Jesus was in the world not first and foremost to physically heal people – he was in the world to heal people spiritually

To do something about human sin

That was the motivation of his coming

Remember the words of John the Baptist when he first saw Jesus?

What did he say: "Look the Lamb of God who heals people"

No. "Look the Lamb of God takes away the sin of the world"²

Each Christmas at our carol services we read the words of the angel who appeared to Joseph:

"She [Mary] will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins"³

And remember the words of the apostle Paul in I Timothy who wrote, "Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners"⁴

¹ Rico Tice

² John 1: 29

³ Matthew 1: 20

And so when faced with this man, Jesus did what he primarily came to do, he forgave him his sins

Now if we were to read this story to our average man or woman in Britain today, they would more than likely think that giving priority to the forgiveness of sins is a little strange

In a society that stresses our material or physical needs, anything that hinders our right to a good quality of life is the priority need to be addressed

How could any problem be greater than such a terrible disability?

In a society that either disbelievers the idea of sin or sees it as a marginal one, the priority given to it by Jesus seems at best odd and at worst a scandal

The poet and artist Duncan McKellar was near to death when he was he was visited by a boyhood friend who was Christian preacher

And the clergyman asked McKellar: "Have you made your peace with God?"

And with the slow smile the dying man replied: "I was not aware that we had quarrelled."⁵

Many people today have this view of things – no notion that their relationship with God may need attention

The popular view today is that God has nothing to forgive us for – perhaps even that we need to forgive Him for ruling the world so badly

But we always need to be reminded that Jesus was the only one who grasps reality as it really is

And so we would do well to look to him for guidance as to how the world really works rather than to the whims of whatever worldview happens to be in vogue during our lifetime

Jesus' words cut through all the smoke screens and deceptions and biases and fashionable ideas in any culture

They sound the note of truth and should cause us to sit up and take note

We have to learn to read the world according to Jesus' script and no one else's

For only he is the truth and only he truly sees the world as it is

And the fact is that Jesus' diagnosis of the human problem was sin

⁴ 1 Tim 1:15

⁵ http://www.archive.org/stream/poemsmck00mckeuft/poemsmck00mckeuft_djvu.txt

And we would do well to pay attention even if most of our peers don't agree

Sin robbed Adam and Eve and all their descendants of God and of true human existence

John Stott always says that in finding God we find ourselves

The reverse is also true; in losing God we lose ourselves

Sin has seriously messed up the human race

But its not just the impact on us that sin has had that concerns us here

For it is sin that takes human being out from under the pleasure of God and puts us under His wrath and judgment

And if our sins are not forgiven we are not on our way to heaven but can expect to spend an eternity in separation from heaven

It's always good to be disabused of the extraordinary delusion that God shares our complacency about our sin and wrongdoing⁶

He does not

And unless we are forgiven we will not meet God in his love, only in His wrath

I once saw a report on the BBC news

A well-known footballer had just been acquitted of a charge of rape by a court

And as he came out of court a freed man there were tears of relief running down his face

This man had found that to fall into the hands of the law was a frightening thing

He'd been on a charge and the law demanded recompense if he was found guilty

His liberty was at stake

It was a charge he couldn't wriggle his way out of

He couldn't shut his eyes and pretend it would go away – it wouldn't

If he was guilty, excuses counted for nothing; his money couldn't help him, his fame couldn't help him, his friends couldn't help him

There was no escape from the demands of the law

⁶ David Turner

No wonder he was relieved at his acquittal

But how much more fearsome it is to fall into the hands of the living God and be guilty before His law

A law which if broken – just like the law of our land - also demands that it be satisfied by justice been done

We would do well to remember that God in His holiness counts sin a billions times more serious than we in our sinful condition can ever do

Now I hope that as we reflect on these things we see afresh the need to have our sins forgiven

That we see why the need to have our sins forgiven in the end eclipses all our other needs

That our spiritual need in the end is always greater than our physical need

That's the first lesson: we need Jesus' words to teach us on how the world works – what really counts – not what we feel counts

And this man firstly needs forgiveness

And so Jesus grants him forgiveness

Now in the room there were teachers of the law watching him

Most commentators don't think that they were local synagogue officials

More likely they were men that had been sent out from Jerusalem with the mandate of investigating who this new teacher was

A delegation had already questioned John the Baptist about who he was (you can read about that in John 1 19ff)

And here they were checking out Jesus

And after Jesus forgave this man, we read that were are thinking to themselves:

“Why does this fellow talk like that. He's blaspheming! Who can forgive sins but God alone?”

Notice that they didn't say these things out loud; they just thought them

And were they right?

Didn't the prerogative to forgive sin rest with God alone?

Absolutely

Their reasoning was flawless; their theology was faultless

Every good Jew would have known by heart the words of King David after he'd committed adultery with Bathsheba and then organised the death of her husband Uriah in battle

“Against you, and you only have I sinned and done evil in your sight”⁷

Yes, we know that in one sense David had sinned against Bathsheba and against her husband Uriah

But fundamentally he had sinned against God the holy Creator of this universe

In the final instance all sin is against Him

Let me try and illustrate this

Let's say I murder Joe Blogs

Under English law, when I appear in court, you will hear something like, “The Crown verses Andrew Carter”

We won't hear, “Joe Blog's family verses Andrew Carter”

The reason is that when the British legal system was established it was considered that the Crown or The State represented God against Whom all crimes are committed

So in killing Joe Blogs, in the final instance I don't sin against him, I sin against God

All sin is against God in the end

So what right had Jesus to forgive – especially sin committed against other people?

These men were spot on in their thinking

And what does Jesus do?

We read that in his spirit he knows their thoughts and so he asks them:

"Why are you thinking these things? ⁹Which is easier: to say to the paralytic, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Get up, take your mat and walk'?"

You'll notice as you read the gospel accounts that Jesus frequently used questions to challenge his critics

Usually he waited for an answer - but not here

⁷ Psalm 51

Instead he simply ceases the moment to give us one of his clearest demonstrations of his claim to divinity

He says verse 10,

¹⁰But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins" He said to the paralytic, ¹¹"I tell you, get up, take your mat and go home." ¹²He got up, took his mat and walked out in full view of them all. This amazed everyone...

What Jesus does is to connect his healing power to his authority to forgive sins

And he and his audience knew that only God could forgive sins

Jesus effectively says: my ability to heal this man is a demonstration of my authority to forgive sin

And if only God can do that, I am God walking the earth

It was a staggering claim

And so here we have lesson number two

The story points to the identity of Jesus

It's one of many incredible things that Jesus did as signs pointing to who he was

There were many more

On other occasions he spoke to the wind and the waves, telling them to be still during a raging storm and they were; he fed the five thousand; he walked on water; he gave sight to the blind; he raised the dead; he allowed people to worship him

Now here I want to use this passage to address the most commonly held assumption in our society about Jesus Christ – that he was good religious teacher or leader – but no more – certainly not God

The good teacher theory of Jesus' identity is the general view on the street

The idea that we can place Jesus alongside the founders of other religions – Mohammed; Buddha; Confucius – he's really in the same category as them

But is it realistic to think that?

Is it tenable to think that a sane and good moral teacher would make the claim to be God?

Would a good teacher claim that he had the right to forgive sin – sin that wasn't even against him?

Would a good teacher claim that he could save his followers from death?

Would a good teacher claim – as Jesus did - that he was sinless?

Would he claim that heaven and earth would pass away but his words would never pass away (Luke 21:33)

Would he claim that he would judge the world?

Imagine if a car mechanic from Wigan turned up in London and made these claims – one thing's for sure - no right-thinking person would call him a good teacher

We'd either think he was a nutter who was self-deceived or that he was a compulsive liar

And if was either of these things, he wouldn't be a good teacher

If Jesus was only a man and not God, how could he be a good teacher if he was misleading people about the most important aspect to his ministry – his identity?⁸

When you think about it, it is really is hard to suggest that Jesus was only a good teacher and still keep a straight face!!

Ordinary good people don't make the claims he made or do the things he did

When we think about the crux claim of Jesus – that he shared the same nature of God - we only really have three options as to who was⁹

- (1) He could have been a liar
- (2) He could have been mad – in CS Lewis' words he could have been a lunatic
- (3) He could have been who he said he was - the Lord – God in the flesh

CS Lewis wrote, ““A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic – on a level with the man who says he's a poached egg – or he would be the devil of hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God; or else a madman or something worse...but let us not come up with any patronising nonsense about His being a great teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to.”¹⁰

But let me finish on my final and third lesson from this passage

Look in verse 9

⁹Which is easier: to say to the paralytic, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Get up, take your mat and walk'?

By this verse I think that we are reminded that it was actually easier for Jesus to heal this man than to forgive him

⁸ Josh McDowell, More than a Carpenter, p28

⁹ CS Lewis, Mere Christianity p52.

¹⁰ CS Lewis, Mere Christianity, p52.

Healing was possible because of the power of God

But forgiveness was and is only made possible by Jesus going to the cross

Not even God can forgive without the cross

If God were to forgive sin without the basis of the cross moral chaos would result

But there was nothing easy about the cross

The cross is the place where it became possible for God to forgive sinners without compromising his holiness

It is the place where his holiness in judging sinners can be expressed without frustrating his love

And so as we see Jesus granting this man forgiveness of sins, I wonder whether Jesus was thinking about what was involved for him to make that forgiveness possible

For him it meant leaving the glories of heaven and becoming a baby at Bethlehem; it meant 30 years in obscurity working as a carpenter; it meant three years of ministry and finally that long journey to Calvary's hill where he was to die in terrible agony standing in for men and women who stood under the charge of having broken the holy law of God

And worst of all it meant being cut off from the One whom he had lived with in eternal fellowship with – his Father

Let us not forget that Jesus could forgive this man's sin for one reason and one reason only - that he would shortly pay for that man's sin himself with his own blood at a place called Golgotha

In the words of the song we sing Jesus took the blame – for that man's sin

And so in comparison with that, healing this man of his paralysis was easy

The forgiveness of his sins was the greater miracle

God's forgiveness may be free but let not one of us think for a moment that it was cheap to obtain

Forgiveness came at the price of the life of the Son of God himself

STOP