

Address on 5th July 2020 – Lessons from Mark's gospel, week 2

Where do you stand? The healing of a paralysed man - Mark2:1-12

Introduction

Growing up in a building family, one of my earliest memories is asking my Dad for a saw to cut a piece of wood. Not wanting to discourage me he gave me one of his old saws with which he knew I could do no harm. Nearly as long as I was tall, it was already blunt. I don't think I did ever manage to cut through the piece of wood I had selected but it didn't daunt my enthusiasm and I have always had a keen interest in building and construction.

It is not surprising therefore that today's Bible story has a particular interest for me in that to get the paralysed man to Jesus his friends had to make a hole in the roof. I can remember wondering as a boy what the roof was made of and exactly how they managed to climb up without falling off or make a hole big enough to let a stretcher down through it. Our film clip today reminded us that in the middle east many houses are built with flat roofs and gave us some clues as to how it might have happened.

Taking off the roof

The story starts with Jesus 'at home' in Capernaum. Almost certainly this is Simon Peter's home where Jesus is a very welcome guest, though whether Peter realised how many people would gather to see and hear Jesus is another matter. We're told that they gathered in such large numbers that there was no room left, not even outside the door. Then came four men carrying a friend who was paralysed and unable to walk. They had a problem. How could they get him to Jesus? Well, problems are for solving, so they climb onto the roof and then let the man down right in front of Jesus. What will he do? Will he have compassion on the man? He has already healed many, will he heal this man?

Jesus, always full of challenge and surprises looks at the man and says to him, 'Son, your sins are forgiven.' You can feel the ripple going through the crowd. This wasn't what they were expecting and what's more how can this preacher be so presumptuous as to think he can forgive someone's sins? This is exactly what the scribes and pharisees had in their minds. This was blasphemy, for only God can forgive sins.

Rise up and walk

Jesus of course knew exactly what they were thinking and so he challenges them. Which is easier to say, 'your sins are forgiven, or rise up and walk?' And then he did something to shut them up, at least for a while, he said to the man, 'get up take your mat and go home.' And that is exactly what happened. The man got up, picked up his mat and walked out in front of them all.

You may be thinking to yourself, why didn't Jesus heal everyone he met? Why does he sometimes answer our prayers for healing but not always? These are good questions, but they are questions for another day. The point of this miracle was to show his hearers, and us too, that Jesus does indeed have the power to forgive sins. This miracle is about an internal need not an external one. It is about the need for forgiveness rather than physical healing. What point is there if we are whole in body but remain cut off from God as a result of our sin?

In Jesus' response to the paralysed man we are taught two things, that our primary need is for forgiveness and that Jesus is the source of that forgiveness, if we put our trust in him. Yes, we also see his compassion in healing this man but the primary lesson is about God's forgiveness, which if we are honest we all need.

Where are you in this story?

I said in my introduction to our service today that we would ask ourselves with whom in the story we most identify. There are a number of people present apart from Jesus. There is the paralysed man and his four friends. Jesus disciples are no doubt there too. Then there are the Teachers of the Law and the rest of the crowd. Where are you in this story?

Are you the paralysed man, looking for forgiveness, longing to be in a relationship with God, wanting Jesus to touch your life? He promises that all who turn to him can know forgiveness and receive everlasting life.

Are you like his friends, keen to bring others to Jesus? Or do you shy away from this and leave it to others? We say as Christians that we believe Jesus has the words of eternal life but often we act as if we don't really believe it and as though no-one else would be interested, or as though it is someone else's job to introduce others to him. It's the job of us all. If only we were all so eager as these friends to bring our friends to Jesus. I often say to people, and you'll hear me say it again, if in this year we could each bring just one other person to know Jesus then the church would be double the size at the end of the year than it is now. Imagine that.

Maybe you're like the disciples eager to hear the message and keen to live the life to which Jesus has called you. They gave up their livelihoods to follow him. They wanted to be where the action was, where God was at work.

Hopefully, you are not like the teachers of the law. They often seemed to gather to try to catch Jesus out. Were they jealous of him? Very likely. He seemed far more popular than they were and had something to say which really resonated with people. He talked about forgiveness and fullness of life rather than rules and regulations. He talked about God's love rather than laws which they were expected to follow.

Then there's the crowd. Some were eager and wanted to be at the centre. They were keen to hear what Jesus had to say and wanted to learn more. They didn't want to miss out. But there were also many around the fringe. Did they hang back on purpose, not quite certain about this new rabbi and what he was saying, not ready yet to commit themselves? Did they keep their heads down on purpose, interested, but hoping not to be noticed or challenged too much?

Where are you in this story? Where do you stand? Or, maybe what's more important to ask is, where would you like to be? Maybe you're at the centre already, close to Jesus, following him day by day. Or maybe you are on the fringe still looking in. Is God calling you to come closer, to make a more positive commitment?

Summary

In this story Jesus shows, by healing a man physically, that he has the power to forgive sins. Jesus' action was what John would call in his gospel a 'sign', a sign of who he is and what he can do. But maybe the big question for us is to consider where in this story we stand and to ask ourselves is God calling us to come closer to the centre. Are we happy being spectators or do we want to get involved, and if the latter, then how? Can I encourage to think and pray about this during the week and ask God where he wants you to be.

Prayer

Lord thankyou for your forgiveness. Show us what it means to be your followers in the twenty first century, we pray. Amen.

Anthony Smith