

A HEALING WITH A MEANING

Matthew 9:1-8

At first sight our reading today is a very simple and straightforward story of the healing of a paralysed man, but as we look at it more detail we find that it has much deeper meaning. So, let's study this passage together, and, as we do so, you can find the main passage on page [***] of the church Bibles or all the relevant verses will be displayed on the screen.

First of all we need to look back to chapter 8 of Matthews gospel where Jesus demonstrates his mastery over two massive areas - over nature when he calms the sea of Galilee in verses 23-27 of chapter 8 and then over the demonic when he casts out demons into a herd of pigs in verses 28-34. As with the account of mastery over the demonic I just mentioned, the account of the healing of a paralytic in our reading today is quite abbreviated compared to the account of the same incident in both Luke's gospel and Mark's gospel - and I'm just going to read to you the account from Mark chapter 2:

“A few days later, when Jesus again entered Capernaum, the people heard that he had come home. So many gathered that there was no room left, not even outside the door, and he preached the word to them. Some men came, bringing to him a paralytic, carried by four of them. Since they could not get him to Jesus because of the crowd, they made an opening in the roof above Jesus and, after digging through it, lowered the mat the paralysed man was lying on. When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, "Son, your sins are forgiven." Now some teachers of the law were sitting there, thinking to themselves, "Why does this fellow talk like that? He's blaspheming! Who can forgive sins but God alone?" Immediately Jesus knew in his spirit that this was what they were thinking in their hearts, and he said to them, "Why are you thinking these things? Which is easier: to say to the paralytic, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Get up, take your mat and walk'? But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins...." He said to the paralytic, "I tell you, get up, take your mat and go home." He got

up, took his mat and walked out in full view of them all. This amazed everyone and they praised God, saying, "We have never seen anything like this!" (Mark 2:1-12 NIV)

Returning to our reading of this healing from Matthew's gospel we see that Jesus had crossed over the Lake of Galilee - look at verse 1:

"Jesus stepped into a boat, crossed over and came to his own town."
(verse 1)

Jesus was returning after casting out the demons into a herd of pigs on the other side of Lake Galilee, a story Matthew recounts at the end of chapter 8 as I mentioned earlier. We know from Mark's account that the place Matthew refers to as "his own town" was Capernaum, so presumably Jesus had ceased living in Nazareth and taken up residence in Capernaum. This is the scene for Jesus's miraculous healing.

A paralysed man is brought to Jesus - look at the beginning of verse 2:

"Some men brought to him a paralytic, lying on a mat.
....." (verse 2)

None of the gospels tell us why this man was paralysed, they don't tell us what condition he was suffering from, its enough for us to know that he *was* paralysed and therefore unable to walk. Mark makes clearer than Matthew the vicarious faith of the paralysed man's friends. They took the huge risk of destroying the roof of another man's house to get the paralytic into Jesus' presence - and Jesus eventually responded to that faith with a miraculous healing.

But, Matthew chooses to emphasise elements of this story that point to the divine nature of Jesus. Yes, Jesus knows the faith of the man's friends and he knows the thoughts of his critics, the teachers of the Law. Yes, Jesus eventually shows God's power to heal. But, the heart of the matter on which Matthew concentrates, is the forgiveness of sins.

Jesus first of all takes it upon himself to do what only God can do, forgive sins - look at the end of verse 2 of our reading:

“Some men brought to him a paralytic, lying on a mat. When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, "Take heart, son; your sins are forgiven."” (verse 2)

Jesus knew that the man needed spiritual healing even more than physical healing and the meaning of the Greek word used here for forgiveness is that Jesus is saying that the man's sins are sent away and forgotten forever.

This is the only occasion in Matthew's gospel where Jesus gives forgiveness to a specific individual. In his only other account of the healing of another different paralytic (Matthew 8:5-13), Matthew doesn't mention the forgiveness of sin in connection with the healing. Indeed the only other account in any of the gospels which makes a connection between sin and healing is in chapter 9 of the gospel of John:

“As he went along, he saw a man blind from birth. His disciples asked him, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" "Neither this man nor his parents sinned," said Jesus, "but this happened so that the work of God might be displayed in his life.”
(John 9:1-3 NIV)

as you can see, here the connection between sin and sickness is made in order to *dismiss* the idea of sin as the cause of blindness. In our reading today, Matthew certainly isn't saying that the man's paralysis was caused by his sins - he's saying that the paralysed man needed forgiveness of sins more than he needed physical healing. In fact we all need forgiveness of our sins more than we need anything else, because the forgiveness of our sins is our key to entry into the kingdom of God, our key to eternal life.

Now the power to forgive sins would be a preposterous claim for a mere man to make and it appears like that to the scribes or Pharisees, the teachers of the Law. It immediately invokes their opposition - the first illustration of the opposition of the Jewish officials to Jesus in Matthew's gospel - and it induces the charge of blasphemy. Look at verse 3:

“At this, some of the teachers of the law said to themselves, "This fellow is blaspheming!"” (verse 3)

I think we can assume that the teachers of the Law were probably local Galilean teachers rather than representatives from Jerusalem - but this is the beginning of organised opposition to Jesus and his teaching.

In Jesus' time there was a good deal of discussion among the Jews as to precisely what constituted blasphemy, but it was laid down in the Mishnah that “ ‘The blasphemer’ is not culpable unless he pronounces the Name, [that's the name of God], itself” (*Sanh. 7:5*) The punishment for blasphemy was stoning as *Sanh. 7:4* tells us. Here, it would seem that the teachers of the Law were enlarging the concept for their own purposes. H. Beyer says, “In the NT the concept of blasphemy is controlled throughout by the thought of violation of the power and majesty of God” (*TDNT*, I, p. 622). As the scribes saw it, for Jesus to forgive sins was to assume the divine prerogative; indeed, in both Mark's and Luke's accounts they go on to ask who can forgive sins but God alone. That was what concerned them. They viewed Jesus as no more than another ordinary Galilean man, and thus as someone to be understood within ordinary human limits. For such a person to claim to bestow forgiveness of sins was for them nothing less than blasphemy.

Now, at first sight it seems Jesus's claim to forgive sins can't be proved one way or the other, but from the perspective of Jewish thought that's not actually so. There was a deeply rooted conviction in Judaism that all suffering was a result of personal sin, and that nobody could be cured until their sins were forgiven. For instance, Rabbi Chija ben Abba said:

"No sick person is cured from sickness until all his sins have been forgiven him."

Rabbi Alexander agreed:

"The sick does not arise from his sickness until his sins are forgiven." and most significantly the Talmud says:

“No one gets up from his sick-bed unless all his sins are forgiven” (*Nedarim 41a*).

Although Jesus dismissed the idea that suffering was the direct result of sin, as we just saw when we mentioned chapter 9 of John's gospel,

there's no doubt that the idea of such a connection was a very prevalent part of Jewish thought in Jesus's time and so it would have been important to Jesus's listeners - so Jesus heals the man, even though he hasn't been asked for a healing, look at verses 4-7: "Knowing their thoughts, Jesus said, "Why do you entertain evil thoughts in your hearts? Which is easier: to say, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Get up and walk'? But so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins...." Then he said to the paralytic, "Get up, take your mat and go home." And the man got up and went home." (verses 4-7)

Even without the Jewish connection between the forgiveness of sin and healing, Jesus's demonstrated authority in the realm of physical healing would have tended to validate his authority in the spiritual realm of forgiveness. But, given the light of the Jewish understanding of the connection between sin and healing, imagine the impact that the healing of the paralysed man would have had. Not only would it have shown that the word of Jesus was mighty to effect change, just as the word of God had been from the beginning of time. It would have given the most powerful evidence to them that Jesus really was authorized to forgive sins. If not, how could he have cured the sick man? And that led to the conclusion that he was performing on earth the very task that God reserved for himself in heaven, so he must either be God or at the very least have been given extra special authority by God.

Let's also note that both the forgiveness of sins and the healing we've been looking at were purely by the grace of God. The paralytic offered no sacrifice of a lamb or a dove, indeed he didn't even ask for forgiveness or healing. The forgiveness and healing were purely and simply expressions of God's grace prompted by the faith of the paralysed man and his companions. Also let's remember that the forgiveness of sins does not always lead to immediate physical healing. Forgiveness of sin *will* lead to eventual physical healing at the second coming of Christ when we receive our resurrection bodies, but physical healing is not always immediately received, or indeed received at all, in this life.

The impact of the authority of Jesus we've been considering is impossible to miss. Matthew has laid enormous stress on it. It was seen in Jesus's teaching (Matthew 7:28–29). It is seen in his power over sicknesses as varied as leprosy, fever and paralysis (Matthew 8:1–17). It is seen in his authority over nature (Matthew 8:23–27) and over demons (Matthew 8:28–34). Now, as a final climax, Jesus claimed the authority to exercise the divine function of forgiving sins, and he backed up this claim with a spectacular healing. From the viewpoint of Jesus's hearers, the implication was obvious; the challenge inescapable, look at verse 8:

“When the crowd saw this, they were filled with awe; and they praised God, who had given such authority to men.” (verse 8)

The implication and the challenge of the things Jesus did are obvious and inescapable for us today as well.

In all of the three stories we've mentioned today - about calming the waves on the Sea of Galilee, casting out demons into a herd of pigs and healing a paralytic, Jesus is laying claim to divine authority. The claim is absolutely clear and Matthew documents it superbly. This would have challenged Jesus's hearers to the roots of their being. Some, like the disciples, were awed (Matthew 8:27). Some, like the people of Gadara where demons were sent into pigs, didn't want anything to do with him (Matthew 8:34). Some, like the teachers of the Law in our reading today, were scandalized (Matthew 9:3). As I've already said, this reading gives us the first indication of the Jewish opposition that would eventually send Jesus to his death. Some, like the crowd who had witnessed the healing of the paralytic, praised God as we saw in verse 8.

But, you know, none of these responses are adequate. Nothing less than complete and immediate obedience and allegiance to Jesus and faith in his Lordship and resurrection power will suffice. There is a deep inner logic in it. ‘If Jesus Christ be God and died for me, no sacrifice can be too great for me to make for him,’ said England cricketer and missionary pioneer C. T. Studd many centuries later. Matthew didn't have such a clear view as Studd, but the three stories

we've talked about this morning demonstrate that Jesus was no mere human. He was the Son of God bringing in God's kingdom. Matthew was challenged to respond. We are being challenged to respond too. If we believe the scriptures then it's quite clear that Jesus Christ is the Son of God who died for our sins. We need to respond by turning to him in faith, acknowledging him as our Lord and Master and believing in his death and resurrection. Then having received Christ's forgiveness and healing - as the paralytic did in our reading - we need to turn to Christ in worship. Let us all turn to him in faith and honour and worship him this morning.