

## THE BOY WHO GOT BETTER

### John 4: 43-54

In our reading today Jesus returns to the site of his first sign, his first miracle, Cana in Galilee. John always refers to Jesus's miracles as signs because they point to who Jesus is, the Messiah, the Son of God. These two stories from Cana are a cycle which points to the nature of true faith – believing expressed in obedience. They have many parallel themes.

This miracle, the healing of the son of a royal official, bears a superficial resemblance to the healing of the servant of a centurion described by Matthew in chapter 8 of his gospel, but I'm convinced that they are completely different events. There are many differences between them. The centurion is asking for a healing of his servant, whilst the royal official is seeking a healing of his son. The centurion was a Gentile, whilst we have no reason to suppose that the royal official was a Gentile. Furthermore, the centurion simply spreads his need before Christ, whilst the royal official dictates to Jesus. Moreover, as we shall see, Jesus treats this royal official far more negatively than he did the centurion.

It is very possible that John had read Mark's gospel and perhaps even the gospel of Luke before he wrote his own gospel, but John's gospel is very different to the synoptic gospels and doesn't incorporate lots of material from them in the way Matthew incorporated a great deal of material from Mark's gospel.

So now let's turn to our text, beginning with the first three verses, 43-45:

“After the two days he left for Galilee. (Now Jesus himself had pointed out that a prophet has no honour in his own country.) When he arrived in Galilee, the Galileans welcomed him. They had seen all that he had done in Jerusalem at the Passover Feast, for they also had been there.” (John 4:43-45 NIV)

So Jesus resumes the journey to Galilee which he had begun in verse 3 of this chapter 4. John then quotes a proverb that a prophet has no honour in his own ‘country’. The Greek word used here ‘*patris*’ can mean either own country or hometown. The synoptic gospels always use this word to mean both Jesus’s home country and his home town, Nazareth. This second meaning, home town, doesn’t fit well here and I think the NIV, along with most translations, is quite correct in translating it as simply ‘own country’. That’s often taken to mean Galilee, but I believe that it’s actually a reference to the whole Jewish territory – both Judea and Galilee – as opposed to Samaria from where Jesus has just come. In Samaria Jesus had enjoyed unqualified and unopposed success, but as he returns to Jewish territory the response is ambiguous. John tells us that the Galileans welcomed him, but they welcomed him not as the Messiah, rather because of the miracles he had performed in Jerusalem at the Passover Feast. In chapter 2 of his gospel, John tells us that Jesus made it quite clear that he did not regard such miracle based faith as true faith, unlike the faith of the Samaritans. Let’s just see what Jesus said there: “23 ¶ Now while he was in Jerusalem at the Passover Feast, many people saw the miraculous signs he was doing and believed in his name. 24 But Jesus would not entrust himself to them, for he knew all men.” (John 2:23-24 NIV)

The material that follows also supports this point of view. In chapter 5 of John’s gospel, Jesus is subject to increasing opposition in Jerusalem. Chapter 6 has Jesus back in Galilee, where the crowds misunderstand his Messiahship and many of his disciples abandon him. Eventually, in chapter 12 of John’s gospel, Jesus pronounces the final verdict on the failure of the Jews to believe in him: “36 Put your trust in the light while you have it, so that you may become sons of light.” When he had finished speaking, Jesus left and hid himself from them. 37 ¶ Even after Jesus had done all these miraculous signs in their presence, they still would not believe in him. 38 This was to fulfil the word of Isaiah the prophet: "Lord, who has believed our message and to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?" 39 For this reason they could not believe, because, as Isaiah says elsewhere: 40 "He has blinded their eyes and deadened

their hearts, so they can neither see with their eyes, nor understand with their hearts, nor turn—and I would heal them.”” (John 12:36-40 NIV)

His words are not aimed solely at the Pharisees and other Jewish leaders, or even just Judeans, for Jesus was speaking to vast crowds at the Feast and specifically addresses himself to those who had come for the Feast – which would certainly have included Galileans.

Jesus was well received in Samaria, which is why this episode is so important and dealt with at some length by John, but Jesus presses on in his own *patris*, where the Jews will eventually send him to Calvary. This was his mission from the beginning – to be the lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world in his sacrificial death and glorious resurrection. John is telling the Jews that they need to accept Christ on his terms, not theirs, otherwise they risk being left out.

Let’s turn back to our text and look at verse 46:

“Once more he visited Cana in Galilee, where he had turned the water into wine. And there was a certain royal official whose son lay sick at Capernaum.” (John 4:46 NIV)

This royal official was probably in the service of Herod Antipas, the tetrarch of Galilee – who was not actually a king at all, but was often considered as one. As I’ve already said, this official was unlikely to have been a Gentile and it was his son and not his servant who was sick – in contrast with the centurion in Matthew and Luke.

Let’s move on to verses 47-49:

“When this man heard that Jesus had arrived in Galilee from Judea, he went to him and begged him to come and heal his son, who was close to death. “Unless you people see miraculous signs and wonders,” Jesus told him, “you will never believe.” The royal official said, “Sir, come down before my child dies.”” (John 4:47-49 NIV)

The royal official’s anxiety is a deeply human one: his son is dangerously ill at home in Capernaum, some twenty miles away. Jesus’ earlier miracle at Cana is quite probably known to the father and, on the basis of this ‘faith’ in the supernatural power of Jesus, he

beseeches him to come to his home and perform a healing miracle on his boy who was apparently, by this stage, at death's door. The Greek is in a continuous tense, so we can assume he was persistently begging Jesus. This is in contrast with the centurion whose faith in Jesus's powers did not require Jesus's presence or physical touch and whose humility recognised that his home was not worthy of Jesus. It's also noteworthy as it is the only one of the signs in this gospel where Jesus does not take the initiative. Jesus' rejoinder in verse 48 seems at first sight surprisingly brusque: *Unless you people see miraculous signs ... you will never believe*. However, the "you people" makes it clear that Jesus is also addressing a wider audience and not just the royal official. They wanted to experience the spectacular and sensational and lacked a deep trusting faith. Elements of the church which lay undue stress on charismatic spectaculars can be like this today. We can also see this as a challenge to the father to exercise faith in the miraculous power of God operating through Jesus. Jesus's words of reproof dominate the account and reinforce the impression that the welcome the Galileans accorded Jesus was fundamentally flawed, based as it was on too great a focus on miraculous signs. We already noted that when we were looking at verses 43-45.

In John's gospel too much interest in Jesus's signs or miracles themselves is presented as spiritually dangerous. Miracles in and of themselves do not bring us to a place of true faith, although they can encourage our faith.

Let's move on again and look at verse 50:

"Jesus replied, "You may go. Your son will live." The man took Jesus at his word and departed." (John 4:50 NIV)

This is healing at a distance. Jesus speaks the word in Cana and brings about healing in Capernaum. The official does now demonstrate some faith in that he accepts Jesus's word and departs.

Moving on again let's look at verse 51:

"While he was still on the way, his servants met him with the news that his boy was living." (John 4:51 NIV)

On his way down – it’s always downhill on the way to the lake of Galilee which is around 700 feet below sea level whilst the surrounding land is much higher. The official meets up with his servants who are bearing the good news that his son’s condition has improved – remember the son was stated to be close to death in verse 47.

The timing of the healing stimulates the faith of the official – look at verses 52-54:

“When he enquired as to the time when his son got better, they said to him, "The fever left him yesterday at the seventh hour." Then the father realised that this was the exact time at which Jesus had said to him, "Your son will live." So he and all his household believed. This was the second miraculous sign that Jesus performed, having come from Judea to Galilee.” (John 4:52-54 NIV)

The timing of this miraculous healing ‘around the seventh hour’ would probably have been reckoned from 6 in the morning making the healing at 1 pm in the early afternoon. This strengthened the faith of the official who realised that this was the exact time Jesus had performed the healing. Indeed we’re told that his whole household were brought to faith in Jesus. This was the second miracle Jesus had performed in Galilee (the first having been the changing of the water into wine). John is not including the additional miracles Jesus performed in Judea here.

However, faith based on signs and miracles must not be mistaken for true faith, which is why Jesus does not encourage it. Such faith fails to honour God, since by it he serves us rather than the other way round. We are left with the mistaken notion that we are in a position to dictate terms to him. It is in obeying God’s commands and trusting his promises that true faith is expressed. When we do that, we have ceased to dictate the terms of our relationship—we exist for Our Lord, not the Lord for us. We obey, now we truly ‘believe’.

This leads us to another aspect of faith, its *development*. There is a notable progression in the royal official’s response to Jesus, from seeking *miraculous signs* to taking *Jesus at his word*, to *believing*.

Our faith, like that of the official, is a living thing which grows and develops.

Greater things were at stake in this encounter with Jesus than simply the healing of the boy. There was the healing of the father also, a healing of spirit, which, having been obtained, was the means of blessing to his entire family. It is *this* final treasure that Jesus seeks and he is prepared to allow us to experience deep affliction in the process of obtaining it. As it says in Psalm 119 verse 71 'It was good for me to be afflicted so that I might learn your decrees'.

We should also note the persistence of the official in making the long journey to meet with Jesus. We need to exhibit similar persistence in our prayers and petitions to our Lord.

So, in spite of what I've been saying earlier, emphasising the inadequacy of miracle based faith, miracles do have value in strengthening the faith of waiverers and indeed bringing unbelievers to faith. Nevertheless as Jesus himself made clear, faith based on miracles alone is not an adequate faith. Of course, we can and do pray for miraculous intervention, I certainly do and I hope you do also, but this can't be the foundation of our faith. We must have faith in Christ for who he really is the Messiah, the Son of God. We must honour and obey this Christ who died for our sake on the cross for the forgiveness of our sins, thereby reconciling us to the Father and enabling us to join God's family as his beloved children for all eternity. What miracle could be greater than that. Let us all renew our faith in and our commitment to Christ this day, right now and acknowledge him as our Lord and Saviour.