

Mark 2 Sermon

So this little narrative that we're looking at today is probably one of the most well-known of Jesus' healing miracles. It gets preached on pretty regularly, it's also a favourite in Kids' Church programs. When I told a couple of my non-Christian friends what I was preaching on this week, they'd even heard of it too. It's famous all over the world and throughout history, the story of the paralysed guy getting let down through the roof.

The whole incident has the people there in Capernaum saying, "We have never seen anything like this!" But why? It's not like they'd never seen healing before, as we saw in chapter 1. Well, as Nick told us a couple of weeks ago when we started our look at Mark, we're discovering here who Jesus is through what he says and does, and this narrative gives us a very important insight. But more than that, Mark is asking us to respond. Now you know about Jesus, what are you going to do about it?

Let's have a look at our passage. Jesus is in Capernaum to bring God's good news to people, and everyone - I mean everyone - wants to go and see him. There are so many people there that they're stuffing themselves around the door to get a look or just to be able hear him. Here's a picture of the remains of the houses at Capernaum today, and you can see that the rooms aren't actually that big. So with these small rooms full of people, there's no way you could get even one person in through the door to see Jesus, let alone a guy, his stretcher and all his friends carrying him. That's when one bright spark gets the idea: let's go in through the roof. Easy, right?

Well, here's a picture of the oldest part of the city in Jerusalem, and you can see that even today they have flat rooves. There aren't any back yards to speak of because all the houses are packed so close together, so you do all the stuff you would do in your back yard or verandah on your roof. It's where you put your satellite dish, where you hang your washing out, where your little kids ride their bikes. If it's too hot in the house and not raining, you can even sleep there. But as you can also see, they're concrete. Back in Jesus' day they didn't have concrete, but they still made their rooves out of really sturdy stuff. That way you could do all those things I mentioned and not worry about falling through into the living room.

Getting up onto the roof was easy part. There were usually outdoor stairs that led up there. But then what? It's going to

require some serious digging to make this hole. So you can imagine Jesus standing there as bits of plaster fall from the ceiling around him, trying his best to be heard over the noise of all the hacking and scratching and digging going on above him. Finally the hole is big enough for the paralysed man to be lowered in, and as he gets to the floor, Jesus decides to say, of all things, "Son, your sins are forgiven." Now, I don't know about you, but if I were the paralysed man, I'd be feeling a bit ripped off. I'd just been lugged up the outside stairs, dropped through a roof by my mates, the last thing I would be expecting is "your sins are forgiven". Um, that's great, Jesus. Still paralysed here! Can't we get to the point?

But Jesus is at the point. And the teachers of the law have cottoned onto it : "Why does this fellow talk like that? He's blaspheming! Who can forgive sins but God alone?"

And that's true. I mean, these guys were experts in the Scriptures, so they should know. In Jewish law, the Day of Atonement was the day on which once a year the high priest would confess to God all the sins of the whole nation, placing his hands on the head of a goat, and that goat would be sent off into the wilderness, symbolising God taking away their sins and making their relationship right again. The high priest could then declare to the people that their sins were forgiven, but only God could do the forgiving because God is the person who was wronged.

So what was Jesus up to here? Well, as Nick pointed out last week, Jesus had been fairly benign up until this point. He'd been going around his local area healing people and saying stuff about, "The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news." But it was almost like there was two Jesuses: there was the one going around preaching, and the one that was healing people. But of course they're one and the same person: the message of the kingdom of God is directly linked to his healing. This is what Jesus is spelling out here.

You know, today we've got it pretty lucky, especially here in Sydney. If we get sick, we can go and see one of many doctors at one of many medical centres. If it's really bad, we can go to a local hospital. And it's all free. If we can't go to work because we're sick, we can often get sick leave, or workers compensation if we get injured at work. There are also lots of organisations that can help with rehabilitation and long term care.

Not so in Jesus' day. Think about this paralysed man, for instance. There's any number of reasons why he became paralysed. He may have been born that way, he might have had an accident at work, he might have been injured in the army, he might have caught a disease that led to paralysis. At any rate, once he became paralysed, that was it. He couldn't work any more. Now he was just a burden to his family and a drain on their finances. What's more, it became pretty much impossible for him to participate in community life, especially religious life, which was at the very heart of belonging to the Jewish people. I mean, look at the Temple there. It doesn't exactly say "wheelchair accessible", does it?

So when he's healing people, Jesus isn't only meeting their physical needs, he's using healing as a metaphor for his mission on a bigger scale. The message of the kingdom of God is about reconciliation between us and God. It's about allowing all people, no matter who they are, to be able to come into a relationship with God and worship him freely. Jesus is making sure that nothing, not illness or ability, or even sin separates us from God. Just as Jesus has the power to heal and bring this man back into being an active part of his community, so he has the power to forgive our sins and bring us back into being an active part of God's community.

But there's still the problem: Jesus is forgiving sins. What's more, he's not being secret about it. Despite his preaching and his healing, Jesus feels that he needs to make this point absolutely clear. But in doing so he's created for himself a really dangerous situation. You see, the society at that time was in the middle of a sort of a holiness reformation. More than ever people were becoming really keen on following God's law and doing everything right. That's why the Pharisees were so popular, because that's what they were all about. So that meant that really serious crimes against Jewish law such as blasphemy and breaking the Sabbath - which Jesus in fact does later on in the chapter - could lead to death. That's why the teachers of the law were so upset at what he said, because this was such a big deal.

And what does Jesus say in answer to their concerns? "Which is easier, to say to this paralysed man, "Your sins are forgiven," or to say, "Get up, take your mat and walk?" Anyone can say, "Your sins are forgiven." I said it just then. But you can't tell if it worked or not. There's no outward sign of forgiveness from sin. But say to a paralysed man, "Get up, take your mat and walk," well, you'd find out soon enough whether or

not your words had any power at all. To this sceptical audience, Jesus is proving that he has the power and authority to do the apparently easier thing - forgiving sins - because he has the power and authority to heal this man.

He has the same power and authority as God, because he is God. Whenever you see Jesus forgiving sins, making laws, healing people, driving out demons, calming storms, you won't characteristically find him calling on God to help him. He does it himself because he has the full authority of God to be able to do it. Jesus isn't just a guy who did amazing things. He's not just a guy who taught some really profound stuff about living a good life. Jesus is demonstrating that he is God, showing that his love for us is so great that he came to earth to reconcile us to him.

But the teachers of the law aren't willing to see this. Jesus actions and words here are demanding a response. He's healed a man and forgiven his sins, asserting his almighty power and divinity and what do we get from the religious section of the community? Nothing. And why is that? Well, for the teachers of the law, God was operating outside of their idea of God. He wasn't acting as he was supposed to. So there is zero change. Just this blank wall of hostility and resistance. They have such a fixed idea of who God is and how God should work, they won't - can't, even - acknowledge the coming of God's kingdom that's happening right in front of them.

And that's the big point that we need to think about when we read this passage. How do we respond to Jesus, this king who forgives?

For us as the religious section in our community today, there is a danger for us too to have a closed mind, and a closed heart, about how God can work in the world, and how he can work in people's lives. Sometimes we get affected by a world view that has to have a rational explanation for everything. Sometimes we get bound by our own expectations of how Christians should live their lives, and how people should experience God. There is a danger that we can end up like the teachers of the law. Instead, we should be listening to and following Jesus first and foremost. We should be acting out of love towards God and others, instead of any moral rules we may have made up along the way. We should be acting out of compassion towards others rather than being judgmental. We should be responding in obedience and love towards God rather than self-righteousness, thinking we're so good because of what we do.

But our biggest challenge in how to respond to Jesus comes from a group that we may have overlooked, and that's the paralysed man's friends.

What they've done is carried their friend all the way to this house where Jesus was teaching and are confronted with a sea of people. There's no way they could get to Jesus. It's not like they could shove him in through a window or crowd-surf him over people's heads. They could not get in to see Jesus. How many other people do you think turned up that day with sick loved ones but thought, "Oh, no, it's too difficult," and went away? Not so these guys. They were so determined to help their friend, they were prepared to do something that was difficult, controversial, even dangerous so that they could get him to Jesus. It didn't matter that they were wrecking someone's house. It didn't matter that they risked dropping the ceiling on people's heads. The obstacle of the crowd only meant that they had to think creatively to get their friend healed. Nothing was going to stop them. This is the sort of faith that Jesus recognises and endorses: "when he saw their faith". They were willing to do whatever it takes to get their friend to Jesus.

Are we willing to do whatever it takes to get our friends to Jesus, or do we so often just see an obstacle and give up because we think it's too hard? We shouldn't have a model where the church just sits there and waits for people to walk into the building before they hear about Jesus. It's up to us, people like you and me, to actually bring people to Jesus. We might have to do something a bit different, like start up a car repair and Bible study group, or maybe do something dangerous like hold a prayer meeting for refugees in your local MP's office, but we are the ones that need to show the world who Jesus is.

It really comes down to a question of love. Do you love God? Do you love your friends? Don't you want to see them saved? Then do whatever you can to make that happen. You may have to start small and just invite them along to a ministry in this church or another one. There are plenty out there; just look on our website. Talk to your friends about the gospel, just tell them the amazing relationship you have with the God who created the universe. You can't force them to become Christians, of course. You can't argue them into believing in Jesus. But as Paul says in Romans, how can they believe in someone they haven't heard about?

Don't be put off by obstacles! Don't worry about people thinking bad things about you, or worry about people saying no. Bring your friends to Jesus, introduce them to him, and the healing and reconciliation that he has to offer. This is the sort of faith that Jesus approves of, the faith that does whatever it takes.