

Sermon: Matthew 9.1-8 Healing of paralytic Lullingstone 22 Oct 2017 Jan Thompson

*May the words of my mouth and the thoughts of all our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. Amen*

The story in today's New Testament reading comes from the Gospel according to St Matthew, and can also be found in the Gospels of Mark and Luke. The account in Mark is more detailed than Matthew's, with information about the friends carrying their paralysed friend to Jesus and when they couldn't get into the house for the crowds, they went up onto the flat roof, broke a large hole in it and let their friend down on a stretcher in front of Jesus. In leaving this out, Matthew moves the emphasis from the faith of the friends to the hostility of the religious leaders and the authority of Jesus.

Jesus crossed the Sea of Galilee and came to Capernaum, which was the headquarters for his ministry once he'd left his hometown of Nazareth (Mt 4.13). You can visit Capernaum today if you ever go to Israel. Excavations have taken place there since 1905 and have uncovered the remains of a 1<sup>st</sup> century synagogue, where Jesus would have worshipped, and a 1<sup>st</sup> century house over which a church was built, said to be the home of Simon Peter, one of Jesus' Twelve Disciples. Capernaum was a beautiful town on the lakeside and quite an important centre in Galilee.

We are told that a man is brought to Jesus who was paralysed. Clearly he couldn't walk because he was lying on his thin mattress. His friends had brought him to Jesus because they had heard that Jesus healed the sick, and they wanted their friend to walk. We are told that Jesus saw their faith --- – and then he said to the paralytic 'Your sins are forgiven.' What's going on here? Surely they were expecting Jesus to say 'Get up and walk.' The man hadn't come for forgiveness but for healing.

But Jesus knew that human beings are complex creatures – we're not just physical, but are a complex mix of body, mind and spirit. The word 'health' actually means 'wholeness' and people today speak about holistic medicine. If we want to be healthy, we can't just attend to our physical needs, there is also our mental and spiritual well-being. We all know that our minds and bodies are closely connected. To give just a few examples, people can be

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paralysed with fear, unable to run or scream if something really frightens them. Someone's hair can turn white with shock. Skin problems like eczema are often worse when someone is under stress. When we're unhappy, we feel tired and listless; but when we're happy, we're full of energy. We say people 'jump for joy.'

So when Jesus forgave the paralysed man his sins, perhaps he sensed something about the root of the man's paralysis. Perhaps there was something in this man's heart and mind that was preventing him from getting well, or even causing his physical condition. ...

Anyway, by this time Jesus' enemies, the religious leaders, were on the scene. They are more concerned about religious rules than the poor man who was suffering and hoping to get well. What incensed them was that Jesus had claimed to forgive sins, and so they accused him of blasphemy because only God can forgive sins. But it backfires on them because Jesus asks them: 'Well, what's easier? To say 'Your sins are forgiven' or to say 'Get up and walk.' It is, of course, easier to say 'Your sins are forgiven' because no one can prove this one way or another. But if you say 'Get up and walk', you can see if this happens or not. If the man is still paralysed, then clearly you're a sham.

So Jesus turns to the paralysed man and tells him to get up, roll up his mattress and go home. And we are told 'He arose and departed to his house.' In doing the more difficult thing, Jesus proves that he can also forgive sins. And when the crowds saw what had happened, they marvelled at the miracle and glorified God for giving Jesus this power. They were not just stunned by the miracle but by the fact that God had given Jesus the divine power to forgive sins.

Interestingly, here in Matthew's version of the story, it says they 'glorified God, which had given such power unto men.' This looks forward to the time when Jesus passed on his authority to the apostles. In one of the resurrection appearances in John's Gospel, Jesus says to his disciples, 'Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.' (John 20.23 NRSV) In the church today, when someone is ordained as a priest, he or she is given the authority to pronounce the forgiveness of sins. I'm a minister in the Church of England, but not a priest. In this service, if a priest had been here, after the General Confession, which we said together, a priest would have pronounced God's pardon. As I am not ordained, instead, I read out a

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short prayer, the collect for the 21<sup>st</sup> Sunday after Trinity, which asks God to grant us pardon and peace 'that we may be cleansed from all our sins and serve thee with a quiet mind; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen' (BCP p 190)

Confession and forgiveness of sins is an important part of all the main services in the church, with people joining in together. We all fall short of what God wants us to be. And sins are not just things that we do wrong. We can sin in thought and word as well as deed, and even in not doing something that we feel we should have done. We believe that God loves us and offers us forgiveness and a fresh start. But sometimes things weigh on people's minds and they can't find peace. Priests are there to help them talk through what is worrying them. A priest will help them to pray to God and will reassure them that God forgives them if they are truly sorry and want to try to do better. Sometimes, people need to hear this reassurance from someone in authority in the church. Especially if something is worrying them and affecting their health and well-being, because health is about body, mind and spirit.

No one expects to go through life without ever being physically ill. Even if we're lucky enough not to become seriously ill, we catch colds, break bones, pull muscles ... and as we get older the ageing process takes its toll. So if we take physical illness in our stride, why should we expect to go through life without ever being mentally ill? People are only too happy to talk about their aches and pains, but mental illness in our society has been a taboo subject. Thankfully there are now people speaking out about this. People like Prince Harry, who has recently gone public about the mental problems he built up for himself by not grieving properly after the death of his mother, Princess Diana. And we are all now much more aware of the scale of mental illness among young people as they struggle with the demands upon them at school, the debts they build up at university, and the difficulties of getting satisfying employment. And hopefully, there will be better support for those who suffer depression and other mental illnesses.

But I've said that health is a matter of body, mind and spirit. Believers recognise that to be at peace with ourselves, we also have to be at peace with God. St Augustine (of Hippo 354-430) famously said 'Our hearts are restless, until they can find rest in Thee.' I'm reading a book at the moment written by an English Arabic scholar who bought a house in Damascus before the troubles there, and she writes about Syria. I've just read the chapter on Al-

Ghazali who was one of Islam's greatest philosophers and theologians from the 11<sup>th</sup> century, on a par with Thomas Aquinas in Christianity. He describes in one of his many books, how, later in life he had a spiritual and physical breakdown. He knew that he needed to retreat from his highly respected profession. So he sold up, made provisions for his family, left Baghdad and travelled to Syria where he spent two years living in a minaret of the Great Mosque in Damascus. And here he eventually regained his sanity along with a close personal relationship with God.

We all need to give time to our spiritual health. Some people find that the regular Sunday service is enough to help them to refocus their lives on God as they prepare for another week. Sometimes people go on 'quiet days'. Recently Tina ran a session for the Benefice on 'Praying with Pictures'. It was just an hour and a half on a Thursday morning, but it provided stimulation for quiet meditation on where we are now and where we want to be in the future. Sometimes people 'go on retreat' for several days, and there are monasteries and retreat houses that provide for this. Clergy, especially need to go on retreat to recharge their spiritual batteries – because they are always giving out, and there is the danger that they will run dry.

I'm not asking you to give up two years like Al Ghazali, or even to go on retreat for a week; but I am asking you to attend the two Saturday mornings that Tina and I are running in St Martin's in November. Details about it have been well advertised in our pew sheets. This Diocesan course is about Exploring God's Plans for our life. It's for everyone, young and old; whether or not you are already involved in church work of any sort. It will help all of us to know more about ourselves and what God wants of us. Please take this invitation seriously, and let me know if you can come. This is a great opportunity for you to spend some time on your spiritual well being.

Let us pray:

Heavenly Father,

As Jesus healed the paralysed man by forgiving his sins, we look to you for healing in body, mind and spirit, 'that we may be cleansed from all our sins and serve Thee with a quiet mind.' Amen

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