

## **Jesus meets a paralysed man and the religious leaders part #**

[Matthew 9:1-8, Mark 2:1-12, Luke 5:17-26]

Jesus came home. Not to the home where he had grown up in Nazareth, but to his new home in Capernaum by the Lake of Galilee.

The story of the paralysed man appears quite simple. Jesus was at home in Capernaum. The news got around and the house filled up with people. One imagines a hundred or so would be enough to block a house.

Four men brought the paralysed man on some sort of bed. Traditional beds in the Middle East are often a simple rectangular wooden frame with four legs and with rope woven to form the top. They are then covered with a thin mattress. They are light and are carried by a single person. When someone is lying on the bed they are easily carried by a man at each corner. Indeed they are used in this way as a bier to carry out a dead person for burial.

The four men could not get to Jesus through the crowd, which showed the selfishness so typical of the crowd in the gospel stories. So the men carrying the bed with the sick man climbed onto the roof of the house, opened up the roof and lowered the man on his bed in front of Jesus. Getting onto the roof would have been quite easy as many houses had steps up the outside for that very purpose. As the bed was lowered through the roof one imagines willing hands below raised to take hold of the legs of the bed, with plenty of shouting of instructions! The chap was quite probably well known to all the locals. Jesus must have watched for some time in amazement. Certainly his teaching would have been interrupted for some time while the roof was opened up and the man lowered with much excitement.

Jesus noted the strength of the belief the four men had. Belief that Jesus could heal the man. They also had love. Many would not have bothered with him. They would have run to Jesus themselves with not a thought for the poor man who could not get there without their help. How many of us would bother to take a sick person to a healing service? Those four men bothered.

Now Jesus knew what was inside a man [John 2:25]. He looked at the man, we don't know for how long, and then said: "Your sins have been forgiven". Jesus saw deeper than the superficial. He could see that the man was paralysed by a feeling of guilt. I wonder how many of his friends had guessed that his feelings of guilt had paralysed him. If there were real grounds for his feelings of guilt they might have known what he had done wrong. He may have committed some notorious crime. Perhaps they had decided that God was punishing him for his sin. But we don't know.

Christians today are familiar with the idea of forgiveness. It is the heart of the Christian message. Christ has told us to use food and drink as the sign of that forgiveness so that wherever we are, whoever we are and whatever guilt burdens us we can especially remember whenever we eat and drink that we have been forgiven. That quite simply is the meaning of communion.

It is not easy to discover what the people in Capernaum or the visiting Pharisees and Scribes thought about sin and forgiveness. If we carried out a survey into this today using modern methods we would get a great variety of answers! To carry out a survey among dead people is not possible!

The Old Testament does give us some help. During the time of Moses when the people of Israel were living as nomads in the desert the normal process for seeking and obtaining the forgiveness of sins was to go to the Tent of Meeting and offer a sacrifice. The priest

would perform the sacrifice for him and he would be forgiven. When Solomon built the Temple in Jerusalem he was aware that the people were now widely spread. To go to Jerusalem to offer a sacrifice would not be practical. So he asked God to forgive people when they turned towards the temple in Jerusalem from any part of Israel, or beyond, and asked for forgiveness. A number of Psalms include prayers for forgiveness. There were also a few occasions on which Moses and other prophets were involved in prayers for forgiveness, but usually for the nation turning away from God.

But let us return to the paralysed man. It would appear that he felt no assurance of God's forgiveness and had received no healing of a sensitive or guilty conscience.

So Jesus pronounced him forgiven.

In the minds of the religious leaders who were present this was a great offence. "Who is this fellow speaking like this. This is blasphemy." Jesus was certainly not a priest assuring a penitent person who had brought a sacrifice to the temple. Beyond that only God could forgive sins: "Only God can forgive sins".

For Christians of course Jesus is divine, he is a high priest, though not descended from Aaron, and he is the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. This latter statement had already been made by John the Baptist to some of the disciples. But for the Jews in Capernaum at that time the situation was very different. What Jesus claimed was quite out of order. It was blasphemy. And the penalty for blasphemy was death.

The ordinary people probably didn't care very much for religious niceties. But for the Scribes and Pharisees this was a major issue. Jesus knew what they were thinking. He knew their ways of thinking well enough to pick that up without any difficulty - whether they voiced it openly or not.

He could have ignored the matter, healed the man and continued with his teaching. But he chose not to. He confronted the religious teachers. He made an issue of it. "O.K. then. Which is easier: to tell the man that his sins are forgiven or to tell him to get up, pick up his bed and start walking?"

I imagine Jesus pausing here to give them time to think. Perhaps: "Well it's easy enough to tell someone his sins have been forgiven. And who can tell, only God knows. Unless he's claiming to be a prophet. But it's still blasphemy. As for telling a paralysed man to get up and walk, well that's easy to do, anyone can say it, but ... oh dear ... we know he has healed people before ... oh dear."

I don't think it then came as a surprise that Jesus healed the man. But what he claimed would have stayed with them. "The Son of Man has authority to forgive sins on earth."

This answer is strange. It introduces something new. Jesus did not say: "I am a sort of priest so I can say that God has forgiven sins without a sacrifice being made". He didn't say: "Yes I am a prophet so I am able to state that God has forgiven this man's sins". He didn't state: "I am God, so I am able to forgive sins". He said in effect: "I do have authority to forgive sins. I am something special - the Son of Man - and I am not going to explain anything more about that". And here is the proof: "So that you may know that the Son of Man has authority to forgive sins on earth ...". And Jesus then healed the man.

So the healing becomes an outward sign of the inner hidden forgiveness.

As for the paralysed man, Jesus told him to go home - out of the way of further disputes. The man may have felt that he should stay and listen to Jesus teaching. But Jesus said in effect: "No. Go home." A crowd and disputes were not the place for the man who had just received forgiveness and healing.

As for the crowd: Well they praised God for the miracle of healing. I suspect they forgot the issue of forgiveness. It would have passed over their heads. But seeing the miracle they were full of praise for God and fear because of the powerful force let loose before their very eyes.

We are not told what the religious leaders were saying or thinking as they left the scene.

There are some detailed points worthy of note in this story:

Matthew, Mark and Luke all introduce the story differently. Matthew has already told us (Matthew 4:13) that Jesus has moved to Capernaum, so he can say that Jesus “came to his home town” and we know that this is Capernaum. Mark has previously stated that Jesus has been to Capernaum (Mark 1:22) but has not told us that Jesus has made his home there, so he places Jesus specifically in Capernaum on this occasion. Luke does not tell us where Jesus was.

Luke alone tells us from the beginning of this story that there are some Pharisees and teachers of the Jewish law listening to Jesus. He also tells us that they have come not only from Galilee, in which district Capernaum was situated, but also from Judea, and in particular the capital and heart of Judaism, Jerusalem. So Luke warns us from the beginning of the conflict to come. But this is the first time Luke has mentioned Scribes or Pharisees in his gospel. Matthew and Mark have previously mentioned them.

Matthew and Mark speak of “Scribes”. Luke speaks of “Pharisees, teachers of the Jewish law, Scribes” in different parts of his narrative. These differences are superficial. The two main religious parties were the Pharisees and Sadducees, who differed in various aspects of religious beliefs. The Scribes were a body of religious teachers who both preserved and taught the law, and most of them were Pharisees. Their name presumably comes from their work in writing out copies of the Jewish bible. The priests were mostly Sadducees.

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