

“FAITH AND FORGIVENESS (Mark 6)”
Mark 2:1-12

In recent years, the church has seen quite an upsurge in interest in healing. Today, in many churches, the notion that miraculous healing can take place is pretty commonplace, although very few people would actually claim to have experienced or witnessed a totally miraculous healing (instantaneous, complete and non-reversible). Part of the revival of interest in healing is due to the renewed acceptance of the supernatural power of the Holy Spirit. Part of it is to do with the obsession of our society with instant results. Part of it is to do with a greater awareness of people in our culture that there is more to life than the merely material. You might want to quarrel with some of that analysis, but the fact remains that there are more and more people who are open to the possibility of healing taking place.

The questions then arise about what is actually happening in healing. Does miraculous healing actually occur today, and, if so, how does it happen? What do we need to do in order to experience it? How can we try to bring about healing, for ourselves or for others? What part does faith have to play in healing and how is it linked to other aspects of our lives - physical, emotional, psychological, spiritual? Well, this morning we come to a section of Mark's life of Jesus in which we read about a healing taking place and, unfortunately, it does not seem to provide answers to any of those questions - at least, not complete and final answers, nor answers that could be agreed unequivocally by everyone. Sorry about that - we'll maybe deal with them when we come to some of the other healing stories later in this book.

There's no doubt, of course, that this is the story of a healing - a spectacular and miraculous healing - but Mark is using it to make a quite different point, I believe. So far in this book, we have seen that Mark is trying to communicate something of the excitement of Jesus coming into this world as the Messiah - the chosen and anointed messenger of God - to inaugurate the Kingdom of God. His arrival on earth as the son of a Nazareth carpenter and the Son of God, is in fulfilment of the "*good tidings*", the "*gospel*" which the Old Testament prophets were proclaiming centuries before. Jesus has come to proclaim that there is an alternative way, there are new possibilities for human beings, there is a radical new agenda which he offers to all men and women who want a different way of life.

And, naturally, such a radical message attracts opposition. This section of the story which starts at the beginning of chapter 2 and goes through to 3:6 introduces a note of conflict into the ministry of Jesus. This is the start of real, open opposition to Jesus and his message. The section closes with the ominous statement of 3:6 where we read that different groups began to form a coalition of opposition with the goal

of assassinating Jesus and thus neutralising his message. We'll see in this story this morning that the opposition is pretty well set against him from the very beginning.

So let's look at what Mark has to tell us in these paragraphs at the beginning of chapter 2. Jesus is back in Capernaum. It says that he "*had come home*", presumably to the home of Simon and Andrew which appears to have been his base in the area. And it is presumably in their house that he is addressing the large crowd that has gathered. Most homes in Palestine at this time would have been a single-storey, single-roomed dwelling with a flat roof made of thatch and wattle, possibly strengthened with a layer of tiles. It would not have been terribly large, so we can well imagine the crowd of people filling the room and spilling out into the courtyard or street outside. What Jesus is doing is not healing but "*preaching the word*". Wherever we come across that expression in the New Testament, it means proclaiming the gospel, telling people of this new agenda, describing the new kingdom of God and how to ensure that you are a part of it. That is the main reason for his being here, according to Mark. Jesus himself has said that in *1:38*.

Of course, word has spread about the healing activities of Jesus and there are still plenty of people who want to experience that rather than just listen to his preaching. On this particular occasion, there is a man who is paralysed who wants to be healed by Jesus. Being paralysed, he cannot just walk up to Jesus and ask for help, so he has four friends who between them have carried him to Simon's house. When they arrive, the crowd is so large that they cannot get anywhere near Jesus. You can imagine the sense of frustration felt by the four friends, who have gone to a good deal of trouble to get their paralysed mate this far. Having got to this point, they are not about to give up and go home.

So they hit upon the plan of climbing up on to the roof by way of the staircase that runs up the side of the house (the roof was used for things like storage and sitting out in the fresh air) and trying to find a direct way down to where Jesus was sitting. It wasn't too difficult to make a hole in the roof, scraping away the clay, removing a few tiles and pushing a hole in the straw and lattice work. You can imagine the reaction of the people in the house itself as bits of the ceiling started to fall down around them. Odd bits of clay and thatch would drop down and there would be a fine covering of dust. As they looked up they'd see a couple of faces peering through the hole and then the pallet on which the man was lying would start to descend into the room, accompanied by the instructions of the man himself, the grunts and groans of the four friends and the incredulous gasps and comments of the crowd.

No doubt a wry smile would have crept across the face of Jesus, and a look of horror across the face of Simon and Andrew who would now have to repair the roof. But Jesus saw their determination and

construed it as faith - faith that he would do something to alleviate the suffering of this man. In this story, it appears that Jesus responds to the faith of the men (v5). It's not clear whether it's the faith of the four friends, or the faith of the paralysed man as well, but in this case faith is clearly a factor in Jesus' response. As a result, many people would say that it's necessary to have faith in order to be healed by Jesus.

But as we look at the other stories of healings in Mark's gospel, we see that it's not entirely clear who needs to have the faith. For example, some of the accounts don't mention faith at all - Simon's mother-in-law is one, and the Gerasene demoniac is another. (And if we look into the other gospels there are several account of healings where it's obvious that faith is not involved at all: the son of the widow at Nain is a prime example.) Sometimes it's the faith of the person who is ill, such as the woman who wanted to touch the hem of Jesus' robe: sometimes, as here, it's the faith of friends or, in the case of Jairus' daughter, a close relative. When Mark describes the healing of a boy who is demon-possessed in chapter 9, it seems as if the healing doesn't happen at the outset because the disciples don't have enough faith to do it. There certainly doesn't seem to be any basis for the assertion that some people make today that people are not healed because they don't have enough faith. (Even our experience should demonstrate that.)

In response, though, Jesus looks at this man's primary need and initially offers not healing but forgiveness. "Aha!" some would say. "So sickness and disease are the result of sin. The worse your illness, the worse your sin." Once more, though, we cannot make such a simplistic assumption. Here's something that the biblical scholar Eduard Schweitzer wrote about this passage: *"It is not as if this sick man were unusually sinful, but his case makes the universal separation of man from God more conspicuous and illustrates the truth which is proclaimed over and over again in the Old Testament, that all suffering is rooted in man's separation from God. For this reason, Jesus must call attention here to man's deepest need; otherwise the testimony of this healing would remain nothing more than the story of a remarkable miracle."* Sickness **is** a result of sin, but an individual's sickness is not to be directly related to that individual's own sin. There are plenty of perfectly healthy crooks about and an awful lot of sick Christians!

We live in a fallen world, a world that has been deeply affected by humanity's sinfulness. This world is not as God intended it to be when he created it and the ways in which human beings have fouled up the whole of creation mean that disease and injury have crept into the very fabric of creation. Viruses and bacteria - created by God as part of the ongoing life of creation - have ended up in the wrong places and caused damage and harm that were never intended. Suffering is the result of sinfulness, but we must be

very wary indeed of drawing simplistic conclusions. The point being made here is not to do with the man's sinfulness - that is part of the experience of every human being - but to do with the power and authority of Jesus to forgive.

And that's where the conflict begins to become apparent. Jesus is in Simon's home to proclaim the good news about God's Kingdom. He is telling the people of a new way, a different way, a radical way. And not everyone likes that. Mark notes that there were some of these "*teachers of the law*", the guardians of religious tradition, there in the house. (If you read Luke's account of the same episode in *Luke 5:17* you'll see that these man had come from far and wide to listen to Jesus and, no doubt, pick him up on his doctrine and practice.) It appears that they are men with closed minds and fixed ideas. These are people with vested interest in control and power. They have it all sewn up - and to their advantage - so they don't want anyone else coming along and spoiling things.

Jesus has forgiven this man's sin. No-one but God can forgive sin. Therefore Jesus must be speaking blasphemously. For them there is no alternative. But the alternative is actually the truth. Jesus has forgiven the man's sin. No-one but God can forgive sin. Therefore Jesus must be God. Those teachers of the law have had their spiritual descendants down through the centuries - and they are still very much alive and kicking today. There are those who have drawn up their doctrine so carefully and tightly that they can admit no deviation whatsoever from their own ideas. They have Jesus battened down and neatly packaged so that they cannot conceive of anything happening that is not in their own little theological scheme. They deny the power of Jesus Christ. They consign to oblivion those who do not agree with them on every aspect of their own theology. They have minds which are closed against any activity of God that they have not sanctioned. And to them, as to these first century religious bigots, Jesus says, "Lighten up. Open your minds and our eyes. Consider the possibility that God is bigger than you think he might be."

For the opponents of Jesus in this situation, the new thinking that they had to take on board was that Jesus actually was who he claimed to be - the Son of God: divine. Jesus sees through their questioning and challenges them with a question himself. "OK. Is there any difference in difficulty in saying that someone's sins are forgiven and saying that they are healed?" The answer of course, is no: for human beings they are both impossible. No human being can forgive sins and no human being can heal miraculously. But they're both as easy as each other to God.

"Well," Jesus is saying, "I can forgive this man, but there's no way of proving it, really. You can't see forgiveness happening. But you can't miss a paralysed man walking. So I'll do that as well, just to prove

it.” As A M Hunter puts it: *”He did the miracle they could see that they might know that he had done the other one that they could not see.”* And as the man picked up his pallet and strode out of the house to the amazed gasps of the crowd (and, no doubt, the injured harrumphing of the religious leaders), the claim of Jesus to be divine had to be taken seriously. The objections of the teachers of the law were countered in a visible and dramatic way.

So this story is not about a healing as such. There is no theology of healing here, nothing that we can set down in clear propositions and publish as a *Teach Yourself Healing* book. We cannot draw particular conclusions about the right way to go about healing from this passage - any more than we can draw definitive conclusions about the best way to construct a roof. This story is about Jesus as God. He comes preaching the good tidings of the new Kingdom of God, declaring the presence of that Kingdom amongst men and women. He has authority *“on earth”* (v10) to forgive sins, to make a difference.

But it’s not just a question of declaring the Kingdom, of speaking about it. Jesus’ words are accompanied by action. Even as he is preaching about the Kingdom he is **showing** something of what that Kingdom is all about. God’s Kingdom is about wholeness and forgiveness, about being right with God and at peace with oneself and one’s neighbour. In God’s Kingdom there is no room for illness and for sin, so they are dealt with in Jesus as he ushers in this new age.

And that offer which he holds out to those first century Palestinian fishermen and villagers and teachers and peasants is still valid today. Jesus still forgives. Jesus still heals. Jesus still responds to faith. Of course, that faith needs to be accompanied by action - as it was in the case of the man lowered through the roof - and forgiveness is granted in response to true repentance. The good tidings of the Kingdom are declared here in the words of Mark’s gospel, in the words of songs and hymns and prayers which have been uttered this morning. What is your response? The closed mind of the teachers of the law? Or the grateful and euphoric acceptance of the man on the mat?