

“FOLLOWING THE KING – 16”
Matthew 8:1-17

It's a few weeks now since we last looked into Matthew's Gospel, but we're picking up our series of sermons in that book again this morning. You will remember, I hope, that we've been seeing just how Matthew has been helping the new Christians who were part of the church he was leading to understand something of the ministry and teaching of Jesus. But also, as most of those new Christians were actually Jewish, he is emphasising to them that it is OK to follow Jesus as he represents the fulfilment of all the prophecies and preaching of their Scriptures, our Old Testament. He has shown just how Jesus fits into the amazing plan that God has to restore his broken world, to heal creation and to liberate men and women from the effects, the consequences and the power of sin. For Matthew and his new believers, Jesus is the King and Messiah who had been promised by the prophets of the Old Testament, and Matthew is keen to provide real evidence for that both in the details of Jesus' life – which is what the first couple of chapters about his birth were all about – and of his ministry and teaching.

And on the last few occasions we looked at this gospel we were thinking about The Sermon On The Mount, Jesus' teaching to his disciples about how they should live their lives in the light of the coming Kingdom of God, which Jesus had come to inaugurate. Having been baptised by John and tempted by the devil, and having gathered around him a little group of twelve disciples whom he would prepare to assist him in his mission during his life and beyond, Jesus explained to them what the implications of following him were to be. At the heart of that was a new way of living stemming from a real desire to do things God's way. Love for God and for one another, obedience to God and devotion to him expressed in prayer and worship were to be the hallmarks of the new community of Christians.

And now Jesus really gets started as he comes down from the mountain where he has delivered his sermon and starts to demonstrate to people what this new Kingdom might look like. Matthew stitches together here a little montage of stories about healing. In chapters 8 and 9 we have a selection of some of Jesus' miracles of healing, most of which are recorded in Mark's and Luke's Gospels, but in different places and with varying amounts of detail.

What's interesting, especially in view of the Church's desire down through the centuries to regularise and systematise Jesus' teaching and the way in which we respond to it, is that each of these healings is very different from the others – different people are involved; Jesus heals in different ways; faith is expressed in different ways and sometimes not at all; different people respond in different ways. But the eventual outcome of each miracle of healing is the same – the person is healed.

We're just going to look at the first part of this chapter 8 today and see if there's anything we can learn from this that might help us in our attempts to follow Jesus and live out our own commitment to him in a very different context from this one here. And in these 17 verses we see Jesus healing individuals, some very publicly, some very privately. We see him touching some people and not even seeing others. He responds to the simple cry of one person and reaches out to crowds. He heals those who are part of the mainstream of life and also those who are the outsiders. He responds to the desperate cries of those who are in need of healing and to the cries of others on their behalf, and he also takes the initiative when no-one actually asks for help. The outcast leper asks for help himself. A Gentile soldier comes on behalf of his servant. Peter's mother-in-law, it appears, makes no appeal to Jesus and nor do her family. Jesus responds when the faith is the person's own (the leper), when the faith is someone else's (the centurion's servant and those who were brought to Jesus) and when no faith is explicitly demonstrated at all (Peter's mother-in-law). If you were looking for something to help you compose a liturgy for a service of healing or write a book about how to heal, you'd be hard pressed to find any real pattern here.

This series of stories is used by Matthew to show just what a remarkable ministry Jesus is to have. Clearly he doesn't describe every healing and every miracle that Jesus performs. John has something to say about that in his Gospel in words that Matthew, Mark and Luke could surely echo: *Jesus performed many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But these are*

written that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name. (John 20:30,31) and Jesus did many other things as well. If every one of them were written down, I suppose that even the whole world would not have room for the books that would be written. (John 21:25)

So what is particularly remarkable in this passage? Well, there are three things I'd like to focus on this morning that help us to discover a bit more about this Kingly Messiah and his ministry, three things that can be an encouragement and a challenge to us today, because we follow the same person, the same Jesus as Matthew portrays in these verses.

1. A REMARKABLE TOUCH (vv3,15)

I'm sure many of you can remember an incident in the life of the late Princess Diana which caused quite a stir when it happened. She was visiting a hospital ward which specialised in helping people with Aids. At that time the disease was not really understood, but there was a sense in which those who lived with HIV/Aids were given a very wide berth by most people as they weren't quite sure how you could catch it. Diana sat on the bed next to a person who was suffering with the disease and put her hand on his arm. Many people who saw that were shocked that she should put herself at risk: others were touched at her desire to sympathise with him. Jesus here touches the leper, which was even more astounding than Diana's gesture.

Leprosy was a disease which was very little understood in Jesus' time. It was clearly highly contagious in some forms and left the victims horribly deformed and unsightly. Amongst other things it destroyed the nerve endings so that sufferers would feel no immediate pain if they injured themselves or burned themselves, meaning that they often sustained injuries that left them badly damaged and disfigured. Because of the nature of the illness in some of its forms, all lepers were treated the same and there were strict laws about how they were to behave. *Leviticus 13:45,46* gives a flavour of the regulations and there were two entire chapters about it all: *Anyone with such a defiling disease must wear torn clothes, let their hair be unkempt, cover the lower part of their face and cry out, "Unclean! Unclean!" As long as they have the disease they remain unclean. They must live alone; they must live outside the camp.* The disease itself was bad enough, but there was social isolation and appalling prejudice to deal with as well.

So when this man calls out to Jesus that he'd like to be healed – or "*made clean*", such was the religious stigma attached to it – very few people would have expected Jesus to respond as he did. It's interesting the choice of words here (as always): the leper asks if Jesus is "*willing*" to help him. That word has a very clear stress on it being an act of will: Jesus had to make a conscious choice to help him. And most people, it has to be said, would have chosen not to help as any contact with the leper would have made them unclean as well. In fact, anyone who came within 10 metres of a leper was classed as unclean, whether they intended to get that close or not. And Jesus does not simply speak to the man from a safe and legal distance: he actually goes up to him and touches him. That laid Jesus open to the charge of uncleanness and also to the risk of infection himself.

But the touch worked – as it did later when he simply reached out and touched Peter's mother-in-law. As we've already noted, no-one asked Jesus to heal her. She had a fever, which may well have passed on its own after a bit. Jesus doesn't ask her if she wants healing nor does she, apparently, say anything to him. But he notices and, in the intimacy of her sleeping space, away from the gaze of the crowds who had witnessed the healing of the leper, he restores her to her full health and strength again.

Jesus' touch is remarkable – remarkable both in its effect (it brings complete healing) and in what it says about Jesus and his ministry. He is prepared to work in the public arena as he heals the leper in front of the crowds. And he is prepared to work in the life of someone whom he can see needs his help and whose situation very few other people know about. The touch of his hand on their lives was transformative. Henry Twells' great hymn about Jesus' healing, *At even, ere the sun was set*, contains the line, "*Thy*

touch has still its ancient power". Jesus can still "touch" our lives. He can still have an effect on us. And he will do that for anyone – for the person who serves him, as Peter's mother-in-law did, the person who is part of the mainstream, as it were; and for the outsider, the person on the edge, shunned by others for whatever reason. He will do it in answer to a desperate cry for help, or unseen and almost unnoticed as he spots the need. Never underestimate the effect and the power of Jesus' touch on your life, and be prepared to call out to him at those times you particularly feel you need his touch on your life.

2. A REMARKABLE FAITH (v10)

Again, as we've already said, the faith of the people in these stories was expressed in different ways. The leper called out for himself, believing that Jesus could heal him and would if he wanted to. (He did.) Peter's mother-in-law appears not to have expressed any faith at all. Many of the people whom Jesus healed in the evening were brought no doubt because their friends and families believed it was worth it and Jesus could do something. The longest story in this section is about a person who had faith on behalf of someone else.

This centurion was another outsider. At this time no Roman legions were stationed in Palestine, but Herod Antipas had a troop of soldiers provided by Rome who were under his control. This officer, who commanded a group of one hundred soldiers, was undoubtedly a Gentile. Not only was he a foreigner, but in the eyes of the local population he represented the hated occupying forces. He would not have been someone who was made to feel welcome in many places. Part of the reason for the comment about Jesus not coming to his house was probably because he knew that a Jewish person could not enter a Gentile's house without becoming unclean.

But this man comes to Jesus on behalf of a sick servant who is at home "*paralysed and in terrible suffering*". Servants in those days – without doubt, actually a slave – were usually considered to be part of the equipment of the household, so if one of them became ill, he would be thrown out like a faulty appliance. The very act of his coming to Jesus shows this centurion to be a man of humanity and care for his fellow human beings. And he goes on to address Jesus with a request full of faith in Jesus' ability to heal – and to heal at a distance. Jesus is actually "*astonished*" by the soldier's faith. That Greek word is a very strong one and only found in one other place in the New Testament, in *Mark 6:6* where, ironically, Jesus is astonished because of the people Nazareth's *lack* of faith. He says he's never seen anything like it and uses it as an opportunity to tell the crowd that faith like that will ensure that his Kingdom will embrace those who are outside the usual boundaries of the Jewish community – and some who think they ought to be included will be left outside because they don't share that faith.

Whatever else may be involved in being a follower of Jesus, the Kingly Messiah, a real faith is at the heart of it. And that faith needs to be expressed in actually asking Jesus for his help and believing that he will respond. It may have an impact on your life; it may have a powerful impact on the life of someone else. But please do not go away with the idea that if your faith is not strong enough, Jesus will not work in your life – remember what happened to Peter's mother-in-law. Not everyone has a faith like that centurion and, I suspect, even his faith wasn't that strong all the time. To tell someone whose prayers appear not to have been answered that it's because they haven't got enough faith is an appalling perversion of the grace of God.

3. A REMARKABLE AUTHORITY

We said at the beginning that these healings follow on in Matthew's Gospel from his descent from the mountain where he'd been preaching. Just look back at the end of chapter 7 and see what Matthew notes there: *When Jesus had finished saying these things, the crowds were amazed at his teaching, because he taught as one who had authority, and not as their teachers of the law.* Jesus had spoken with a real authority in that sermon. And now he demonstrates that authority in action. The centurion recognises the

authority of Jesus and believes that it is only a word from him that is needed to heal his servant. As well as the sensitivity and intimacy involved in Jesus' healing of Peter's mother-in-law, his touch clearly has authority. His "*Be clean!*" to the leper is spoken with authority. He "*drives out the spirits*" in the evening. Jesus, even at this stage of his ministry, is speaking and behaving as the one who is in charge, the one who will brook no opposition, the one who expects to be heard and obeyed.

And to emphasise that this is a God-given authority as well as reminding his first readers that we're still dealing with a person who is part of God's overall plan which was preached and prophesied in the Old Testament, Matthew includes in *v17* some words from *Isaiah 53:4*. That surely marks the life and ministry of Jesus with the stamp of God's own authority. As this gospel progresses we will see plenty more examples of Jesus' authority.

It's an authority that has implications for all people. Firstly, it means that we can trust completely the credentials of this Kingly Messiah. In these stories which Matthew and the other gospel writers record we see that Jesus is truly in control. And in the stories that have been recounted of God at work in the lives of people down through the centuries since then we can identify the authority of Jesus being exercised over circumstances and situations that are beyond our own ability to deal with. While I was actually writing this sermon, I received a text from someone telling me about five specific answers to prayer they'd received in the last few days. The authority of Jesus is still being exercised in our world.

But the other implication for us is that this Kingly Messiah exercises an authority to which we must submit. If Jesus is truly able to deal with our infirmities and diseases, if he is truly able to expel demons with a word, if he is truly able to touch people's lives with transformational effect – if he is able to exercise even that authority – then who are we to try and stand against him, or even to ignore him?

And, what's more, we know the end of the story. We know that this Kingly Messiah took on the forces of evil and comprehensively routed them on the cross, This Kingly Messiah overcame our last enemy, death, as he burst out of the tomb on Easter Sunday. Preaching and healing are only two aspects of Jesus' authority: there is so much more as well. And anyone who tries to oppose that authority is ultimately – and spectacularly – doomed to fail.

The last hymn we'll be singing this morning draws out some of the implications of recognising this "*Healing God ... Christ ... Spirit*". As we sing those words in a few minutes, and pray for God to "*renew his wonders as of a new Pentecost*", let us recognise this morning that we need also to respond to the remarkable authority of Jesus, by exercising real faith and expecting to sense his remarkable touch.

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Jesus really starts to demonstrate to people what his new Kingdom might look like. In chapters 8 and 9 we have a selection of some of Jesus' miracles of healing, most of which are recorded in Mark's and Luke's Gospels, but in different places and with varying amounts of detail. Each of these healings is very different from the others – different people are involved; Jesus heals in different ways; faith is expressed in different ways and sometimes not at all; different people respond in different ways. But the eventual outcome of each miracle of healing is the same – the person is healed.

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Leprosy was a disease which was very little understood in Jesus' time. There were strict laws about how lepers were to be treated. Look at *Leviticus 13 & 14*. But Jesus does not simply speak to the man from a safe and legal distance: he actually goes up to him and touches him. The touch worked – as it did later when he simply reached out and touched Peter's mother-in-law. Jesus' touch is remarkable – both in its effect (it brings complete healing) and in what it says about Jesus and his ministry.

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Questions for discussion

1. Reflect on the various differences between these stories of healing. Why do you think there is such variety?
2. What principles can we draw from these stories that might help us in any healing ministry today?
3. How might we experience "the touch of Jesus" today? Have you ever felt that?
4. What part does faith play in the healing process?
5. Jesus is clearly portrayed as a man with ultimate authority. How can we express that faithfully in our multi-faith culture?