

## **“FOLLOWING THE KING - 21”**

### ***Matthew 9:18-34***

Jesus, the Kingly Messiah promised by God through the prophecies of the Old Testament preachers and poets has arrived. He has come bringing his message of the new Kingdom of God, preaching, teaching and healing, calling to follow him those who are desperate to see God’s ways working out in their lives and in the world. And, as we saw last week, what he offers is something completely new, something that brings total transformation. This new way of living, this new set of values and attitudes is foundational, it cannot be patched on to the old stuff with the assumption that everything will still operate as it did.

In the passage we’ve read this morning, that newness is once again emphasised by Matthew. There are four more healing stories here – all different from those Matthew recorded in chapter 8. And at the end of them the amazed onlookers exclaim, *“Nothing like this has ever been seen in Israel.”* This is completely new. It’s the beginning of a new era as the Kingdom of God begins to be established by Jesus – a Kingdom that is superior to the powers that bring, disease, disability, despair, demonic possession. As we saw in chapter 8, these people are all very different. They all approach Jesus in different ways. They all express their faith in different ways. They are all healed in different ways – a touch, a word of comfort, a word of command. Alas! still no template or liturgy we can use today.

But each of the healings also brings home again this newness of which Jesus has been speaking. All of these people who come to Jesus with their problems are changed dramatically. All of them find new life, a new start. All of them are able to move on from these incidents with a new hope and a renewed sense of optimism. They are, of course, familiar stories to many of us – they’re all reported in the other synoptic gospels, though with different details highlighted and different emphases placed on them. We learn from Luke’s Gospel that the *“ruler”* is called Jairus and he’s the ruler of the local synagogue, a very prominent Jewish character. The woman with the issue of blood has been struggling for many years and has exhausted the ability of the local doctors to help her. The blind men here are often linked to the story of a single blind man whose plight is highlighted elsewhere. But Matthew has pulled them together here to add weight to Jesus teaching on newness. Let’s briefly look at them one by one.

The little girl seems the most desperate case of all. She’s twelve, we learn elsewhere, just at the age when she should be looking towards marriage and a new life with a husband. But that hope has been snuffed out by the illness that has gripped her and killed her. We don’t know what it is, but we do know that, in a time when medical knowledge was a lot less advanced than it is today, the chances of death from illness were pretty high. This wouldn’t have been an isolated incident in a town like Capernaum, but that didn’t make it any the less difficult for the synagogue ruler and his wife.

The desperation of this man is clear. He comes to Jesus and kneels before him – an almost unheard of gesture from someone with such standing in the community – which demonstrates his humility before Jesus. He interrupts Jesus’ meal (he’s still at the meal which Matthew mentions in *v10*) and pleads with him to help, even though he knows his little girl is dead. So Jesus goes with him and with the minimum of fuss – he even dismissed the mourners who would have been able to witness the healing – bring the girl back to life. Her physical life is restored to her. New life is granted to her – quite literally. And word gets around – as you’d expect with a resurrection.

On the way to the girl’s house, though, the story is interrupted by this woman who comes to try and get Jesus’ help. The woman had been bleeding non-stop for twelve years. It’s generally agreed that this was a *“ladies’ problem”*, some kind of gynaecological illness. As such it meant that the woman was unclean. If you read through all the rules and regulations regarding disease and so on in The Law of Moses (mainly in *Leviticus*), you’ll see that there were pretty clear guidelines about what to do when a woman was having her period – it really boiled down to social exclusion: no contact with anyone else, no entry to the place of worship, no opportunity to mix with others at all. And anyone who came into contact with a woman at that time of the month was also to be deemed unclean. It wasn’t much fun. And this woman

had been suffering this way for twelve years! Twelve years of legally and religiously sanctioned ostracism.

She'd tried to find a cure by visiting doctors, according to Luke's version of the story, and in doing so she'd used up all her resources. But she still had a tiny shred of hope. She knew that touching the gown of a healer (and there were a few of them about in those days, too), she might get some relief. It was more of a superstition than a real act of faith, but she wasn't going to miss the opportunity. Struggling through the crowd (many of whom would have known her and her condition), rendering anyone who touched her ritually unclean, she made her way to Jesus and reached out to touch the edge of his cloak.

It worked! She was healed. And despite her desperate secrecy, Jesus announced before the startled crowds that she was healed – everything was OK again. This woman could start a new life. Whereas the little girl had been given back her physical life, this woman was given back her social life, her community life. No more could she be excluded from the life of the village. No more could she be pushed to the margins and quietly forgotten and ignored. No more could she be turned away from worship. She was given a new life, a new start

And having healed the woman and restored the little girl, Jesus moves on. This time it's two men who follow him, two blind men. I think we might have been a bit irritated by their behaviour as they called out his Messianic title, "*Son of David*". Strangely, the two men with the physical blindness have the spiritual sight to recognise him as Messiah. But Jesus takes them into a house – his house? Peter's house? Matthew's house? – and asks them if they're serious. It may seem a daft question. If you're blind, surely you'd want to see again. But some people in Jesus' time – and down through the centuries since then – preferred to keep things as they were (some, I say – by no means all). These men would beg, rather than work. They would possibly be looked after by others, rather than have the responsibility of their own upkeep. They would have found their identity in their disability. But these two want to be healed. They allow Jesus to change them and radically to transform their lives. It's another new beginning as Jesus gives them back their productive lives. They can now return to being working members of the community, people who contribute to the life of the village, who are actively involved in what's going on. It would take a bit of adjustment, no doubt, but that's the case with all new beginnings.

Finally, in this passage, there's the story of the man who can't speak. Matthew clearly links this condition with demonic possession – and no doubt there were other signs that this was the case, too. This person is actually "*brought to Jesus*". He was unable even to get himself to Jesus, so powerful was this condition. And, once again, Jesus brings healing. He gives the man a new start by giving him back control over his life. After the restoration of physical life, of social life, of productive life in the others, this man's control over his own life is restored. And to prove the point, the man speaks out again.

Naturally, the crowd are amazed and, as we've already seen, give voice to their amazement by saying that this is all new stuff, it's all unique. Jesus is something different, something new. And it's not the first time the words and actions of Jesus have had such an effect, is it? They've already commented on his authority and expressed their amazement at his preaching and his healings. They see the hand of God at work, even if they're not quite sure how to express that.

But they're not the only ones to comment on these healings, these new starts, these new-life events. As ever, the Pharisees are lurking amongst the crowd and they start muttering, trying to find another explanation for what they've just seen. No doubt they considered themselves too religiously and intellectually superior to be taken in by such illusions. They are not prepared to take the power of Jesus at face value and accept that this is a new, unique event, a new Kingdom power at work. For them this must all be the work of the Devil – it's still, from our perspective, a supernatural explanation, but at least it doesn't concede anything to Jesus. On other occasions (12:24) Jesus is very dismissive of their comments and points out the logical inconsistencies in their thinking, but here he seems to ignore it and moves on to other towns and villages as we'll see next time we look into this Gospel.

There are still plenty of people like those Pharisees around today – both inside and outside the church. Of course, there are the so-called New Atheists, who have to have everything explained rationally, scientifically, otherwise there's no way they can accept anything. For them, healings and other "spiritual" or "supernatural" happenings are down to mistakes in reporting, psychological misinterpretations or plain gullibility on the part of the witnesses. These people love patronising those whom they believe are credulous and easily duped, just as the Pharisees were dismissive of Jesus.

But there are also people who call themselves Christians who are reluctant to accept that God still works in mysterious and unexplained ways. Their slavery to Enlightenment rationalism and brainwashing by a scientific, pragmatic education system (there was a discussion on the radio this week about whether we should bother with art during a recession) means that they, too, cannot really countenance anything that is initially inexplicable. They don't have too much truck with the Holy Spirit and the infinite possibilities that he offers. They cannot cope with the idea of the new Kingdom that Jesus offers: it is unsettling and unnerving. It demands too much commitment.

The whole basis of Jesus' ministry and mission is that he is bringing something new to humanity, something that overturns the old order, that offers a glimpse of a new Kingdom, a new life, a new hope. It's different and vibrant and full of possibilities because it's not bound by the old ways of seeing and doing things. And within that, Jesus offers you personally the opportunity to start a new life. It may be that you want to explore that possibility this morning for the first time. It may be that you find yourself in a situation like these people we've read about this morning whom Jesus helped and you would like your life given back to you – you need healing, the touch of Jesus through the power of his Holy Spirit. We have to admit, we don't know how that happens, but we know Jesus offers it as a possibility to all who need him. So at the end of this service this morning, Ann Richardson and I will be down here at the front if anyone wants to come and ask for prayer. While some music is played and others leave quietly for home or coffee, just come and sit at the front and we'll pray with you. It may be that you're sitting with someone whom you trust to pray with you where you are – please feel free to ask them for prayer and pray quietly together in your seat. The offer is there – and offer from Jesus, rather than us – so come and make the most of it this morning.

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The little girl seems the most desperate case of all. We don't know what her illness is, but we do know that, in a time when medical knowledge was a lot less advanced than it is today, the chances of death from illness were pretty high. The desperation of her father is clear. He pleads with him to help, even though he knows his little girl is dead. So Jesus goes with him and with the minimum of fuss. Her physical life is restored to her. New life is granted to her – quite literally.

That story is interrupted by a woman who had been bleeding non-stop for twelve years. It meant that the woman was unclean. She had had twelve years of legally and religiously sanctioned ostracism. She made her way to Jesus and reached out to touch the edge of his cloak. Jesus announced before the startled crowds that she was healed – everything was OK again. This woman could start a new life. She was given back her social life, her community life.

Then two blind men follow him. They allow Jesus to change them and radically to transform their lives. It's another new beginning as Jesus gives them back their productive lives. They can now return to being working members of the community, people who contribute to the life of the village, who are actively involved in what's going on.

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Naturally, the crowd are amazed and give voice to their amazement by saying that this is all new stuff, it's all unique. Jesus is something different, something new. But they're not the only ones to comment on these healings. The Pharisees try to find another explanation for what they've just seen. No doubt they considered themselves too religiously and intellectually superior to be taken in by such illusions. They are not prepared to take the power of Jesus at face value and accept that this is a new, unique event, a new Kingdom power at work.

### **Questions for discussion**

1. Can you find any common factors in the healings of Jesus? Look at chapter 8 as well. Why do you think they are all so different?
2. In what ways has Jesus meant a new start for you?
3. The mute man's illness is put down to demon possession by Matthew? Does that still happen? How can we deal with it, if it does?
4. Do you believe Jesus heals today? Give any examples you may know of (not just hearsay).
5. Why are some people – even some Christians – so keen to find other explanations for things that others see as miraculous, or acts of God? What's your personal view about that?