

## Mark 2 1-12 Sunday 25 April 2021 Week 4 Littlebourne Chapel

We saw last week that Jesus healed a leper, something not seen since Naaman the Syrian general was healed some 800 years earlier. (2 Kings 5). Jonathan explained that lepers who were healed needed to go through an examination by the priests, have a seven day quarantine period and then offer a sacrifice (Leviticus 14). While the Old Testament doesn't actually say that the processes were just for leprosy, they were for other skin diseases which today we know are contagious, like scabies. The key point was that the leper was told by Jesus to go show himself to the priest and tell no one, but the leper disobeyed Jesus and told everyone when he should have been in quarantine for seven days. Earlier in chapter 1 many were healed in Capernaum after Jesus preached in the synagogue. After Jesus had gone to Simon Peter's house for dinner, healed the fever of Simon's mother-in-law, he healed a whole lot of others that same evening. What their precise diseases or physical problems were is unspecified. Word got around and Jesus had many looking for Him, to be healed. The last verse of chapter 1 says *"Yet the people still came to Him from everywhere."* As Jonathan said last week, the people were looking for healing: both physical and spiritual/mental. Being possessed by unclean spirits was seen as an affliction of the same order as sickness, infections, physical deformities and loss of some physical function – blindness, deafness, lameness. They were all matters that needed healing and Jesus could heal whatever the problem was. However the passage started with the disciples going out looking for Jesus who had after an evening of healing got up early to pray. The disciples wanted Jesus to do what they believed He should be doing: being the healer. They had their agenda which wasn't Jesus's agenda. We will see this time and time again as the disciples didn't understand what Jesus's ministry was really about. Signs and wonders would accompany the preaching of the Word of God: that is the order Jesus had. The disciples thought signs and wonders came first as that was spectacular while what Jesus taught was less spectacular. In our times, is it the showmanship or professionalism of church services which draws in the people, or the actual message? Anyway, back to the text.

*Verses 1-2 A few days later, when Jesus again entered Capernaum, the people heard that he had come home. They gathered in such large numbers that there was no room left, not even outside the door, and he preached the word to them.*

It's only a few days after the Sunday the leper was healed, so probably not yet the next Sabbath Saturday, when Jesus returns to Capernaum. The throwaway phrase "he had come home" implies that He may have been staying with Simon for a while. Remember it is believed Mark's main source for his Gospel is Simon Peter, and he would have said to Mark *"we went home"* if Jesus was staying at his home. When news got out that Jesus was back, a large crowd gathers and gets inside the building so that there's no more room inside, not even outside the door. In those days, people left their doors open in the morning to let the cool morning air in and anyone could drop in. Jesus preaches the Word (logos in Greek) of God to them. Remember from chapter one we said that Jesus's main ministry was preaching and teaching: telling people about the Kingdom of Heaven was more important than the healings. The Greek word "logos" is used here in verse 2 in the same sense that John used it in his gospel "In the beginning was the Word". Perhaps it should read "the knowledge" – Jesus preached to them the knowledge of the kingdom of heaven. Jesus wants us to know God, as He knows His Father God, and this is His mission. Mark uses the word "logos" again in the parable of the sower, chapter 4:14 when He explains that the seed the sower sows, is the word of God, and Jesus is clearly speaking of Himself.

This sets the scene for what happens next: the building is full of people listening to Jesus. However one gets the feeling they hadn't all crowded into the house for a Bible study: people wanted to see miracles and that is what they got.

*Verses 3-5 Some men came, bringing to him a paralysed man, carried by four of them. Since they could not get him to Jesus because of the crowd, they made an opening in the roof above Jesus by digging through it and then lowered the mat the man was lying on. When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralysed man, 'Son, your sins are forgiven.'*

It is always good to go back to the Greek. The NIV says "a paralysed man"; the RSV says "a paralytic" and doesn't specify whether he was a man or boy or a young man... verse 12 uses the male form of the verb "he arose", so we know it wasn't a woman or girl. The word "paralytic" literally means "as if dissolved"... in other words weak limbed. The old King James says "sick of the palsy", which is correct, but then most people have no idea what the

palsy means! It comes via Latin and French into medieval English from the word “paralysis”. It means to be paralysed.

I digress: what we need to know is that the male person couldn’t walk and had to be carried about by four men on a mat large enough to be a bedroll. Carrying someone holding the four corners of a large mat is rather unwieldy, far more difficult than using a purpose built stretcher – try this yourself to find out how awkward it is – and/or a bit heavy, so perhaps not a child... and we’ll come to why I mention child later. There are no records of Roman wheelchairs for the disabled, and Rome, a city of seven hills, was full of steps. Romans had sedan chairs for the wealthy which provided a less bumpy ride than on the cobbled streets. The paralytic had four men with him, and they seemed to be enterprising chaps who used lateral thinking to get the paralytic in front of Jesus. Not only did they have the nerve to break open a large enough hole in the roof, but they had their friend on a mat with enough overlap to be able to lower the mat down to Jesus without apparently tipping him out. Mark is so often sparse on the detail as to the mechanics of how the men dug the hole in the roof and how the mat was lowered as that aspect of the narrative is not significant enough for added explanations. What we do know is that the houses usually had a flat roof made with beams, and across the beams was wattle and daub infill, so it would be relatively easy to move the twigs and clay between two roof beams. What Mark wants us to see is that these men were prepared to disrupt the proceedings to let down their friend onto the people below. These men wanted the paralytic to be in front of Jesus the healer from Galilee about whom so many were talking. They must have disrupted proceedings and made a bit of a mess.

Jesus sees their faith. What do we mean by faith? The Greek word *pistis* for faith is derived from the verb to persuade, which implies perseverance, repeated asking, using rational argument in order to be persuasive. Having been persuaded by the truth of a matter results in faith. Faith is strong belief in something or someone, having been persuaded of truth or correctness, having accepted rationally something is correct and either actually or probably true. Jesus sees the faith of the men who “unroofed the roof” and the faith of the paralytic who wanted to meet Jesus.

Then Jesus says something that the teachers of the Law of Moses found scandalous. Jesus says in verse 5 “Child (*the NIV translates this as “son”*) your sins are forgiven. The Greek word *teknon* is a neuter noun which means child. The same word is used in the rest of Mark’s gospel in its plural when its meaning is clearly children, but in this case may be a term of endearment. It’s not that important how Jesus addresses the one who seeks healing, but it is done with fatherly love. What is important is that Jesus says “your sins are forgiven”. Jesus does not say “I forgive your sins” ... He says that the sins are forgiven which implies God will have forgiven them. For the onlookers this was an astonishing response.

In today’s society, we would not associate a disability with sin, but 2,000 years ago, whether among the Jews or the Greeks and Romans, a disability from birth was seen as a misfortune or punishment due to something your parents or grandparents had done which displeased God or whatever pagan deities people worshipped. This is clearly the view of the Pharisees when the man blind from birth is healed which is in chapter 9 of John’s gospel. They were convinced that to be born with this affliction meant he or his parents had committed some really bad sins. Four times in the Books of Moses – Exodus 20:5; Ex 34:7, Numbers 14:18 and Deuteronomy 5:9 – God says “the sins of the fathers will be visited on the children, the grandchildren even to the third and fourth generation”. Sin can be defined as the gulf between mankind and holy God. Anything that is unholy separates us from a holy God. Jesus is the bridge between all of us who are sinners (“no one is righteous, not even one” Romans 3:10) and holy God. We can stand before God after we have been forgiven, clothed in the righteousness of Christ Jesus, and none of our own righteousness. That is the good news of the Gospel. The accepted reality of the Jews was that for the innocent anything suffered in life might be laid at the door of forefathers who were wicked, or that the afflicted person had done something which God hadn’t forgiven. The blame was never on God... it was always the fault of the sinner or his ancestors. Sins of all kinds whether directed at other people or against God’s laws were first and foremost sins against God. However, all the Jews also knew that God was merciful, slow to anger, and able to do anything. Since people had been healed and everyone could see that they were, the mat carriers and the paralytic knew that Jesus could heal.

Verses 6-7 *Now some teachers of the law were sitting there, thinking to themselves, ‘Why does this fellow talk like that? He’s blaspheming! Who can forgive sins but God alone?’*

Mark tells us what the teachers of the law were thinking as they hadn't said anything. Besides what were these teachers of the law sitting there doing in the building? Sitting rather than standing in the crowd. Throughout the gospels we see scribes, teachers of the Law, Pharisees and Sadducees hanging around in the crowds following Jesus. Except for Nicodemus, they all seem to be critical of Jesus whose activities – whether preaching or healing – were eroding their status as the religious authorities with the answers culled from decades of poring over the Scriptures and commentaries. What really annoyed them was that not only did He know what they were thinking but He left them unable to criticise Him when He justified His actions and outwitted them over and over again as we shall see later.. These sanctimonious self righteous men also could see that being critical of healing someone – something they weren't able to do themselves – was not a crowd pleasing position to take as the people would not support anyone who condemned what Jesus was doing.

What does this say to us today? Jesus knows our thoughts: there is no hiding place from God. Everything we do, we say, we think is on the record. Luke 12:3 says *“What you have said in the dark will be heard in the daylight, and what you have whispered in the ear in the inner rooms will be proclaimed from the roofs”*.

Verses 8-9 *Immediately Jesus knew in his spirit that this was what they were thinking in their hearts, and he said to them, ‘Why are you thinking these things? Which is easier: to say to this paralysed man, ‘Your sins are forgiven,’ or to say, ‘Get up, take your mat and walk’?*

As soon as these men were having their critical thoughts, Jesus asks a couple of questions. How often does Jesus pose questions in response to questions? It is something many Jews still do. When a Christian minister asked a rabbi “why do Jews seem to answer questions with a question?” The rabbi answered “do we?”

Jesus poses the first question in response to the knowledgeable teachers of the law who thought that “this fellow was saying something blasphemous as only God can forgive sins”. Actually Jesus didn't say He forgave the sins. Using the passive voice “your sins are forgiven” means that someone else, like God, forgave these sins, and if that were so, then Jesus's critics would have to agree it wasn't actually blasphemous. When a prophet or priest knew what God was telling him, he would relate that to the person or persons who needed to hear from God. Nathan the priest in the days of King David, told David that God saw what he had done, having Uriah the Hittite killed so he could have Bathsheba as his wife. David confessed his sin, and Nathan said (2 Samuel 12:1-13) *“The Lord has taken away your sin; you are not going to die.”* In other words, even though David had committed murder and adultery, both crimes worthy of death under the Law of Moses, God had forgiven him. At this time, Jesus hadn't said He was the Son of God or the Messiah. The voice from heaven (Mark 1:11) said “you are my son, whom I love, with you I am well pleased.” That is slightly ambiguous, even if it was astonishing to hear a voice from heaven! The accusation that Jesus was blaspheming would only be true if He didn't know that God had forgiven the paralytic. There was a tradition among the Jews that to be healed you had to be forgiven. The teachers of the law or rabbis said “there is no sick man healed of his sickness until all his sins are forgiven him”, and there were rituals to go through to get forgiveness involving sacrifices. The paralytic hadn't done the stuff that the priests expected to be done, nor was Jesus a priest able to accept the sacrifices that needed to be made. However to be healed, a man needed to be forgiven... hence the question is it easier to say “your sins are forgiven or to say get up and walk (or be healed). Jesus presents what we might call two seemingly unanswerable questions. To answer the first would be blasphemy if done without divine knowledge. To answer the second question exposes the man answering to a response from Jesus – “OK, why don't you say ‘Get up, take your mat and walk’?” No scribe or Pharisee would be able to say “your sins are forgiven” as only God can say that, nor could they say “Get up and walk”. If one of them answered the second question and then nothing happened in front of the crowd, it would expose the man answering (who claimed to have a high status in society) to ridicule for failure. Jesus who they all knew as the son of a carpenter from Nazareth, a town from which no good ever came, (*remember last week “an absence of evidence is not evidence of absence”*) was someone they knew from a few days ago who could heal and cast out unclean spirits. Forgiving sins was something new however. Jesus is not unkind this time towards the teachers of the law because He Himself answers the question they cannot answer. They knew they were outwitted, but Jesus didn't rub it in. Later in Matthew's gospel after continual criticism of Him, He compares them to whitewashed walls... looking clean and tidy on the outside to hide the shoddy workmanship underneath the whitewash. Ezekiel 13:10-15 refers to whitewashed walls and God's wrath on those who plaster over a wall that is weak and badly built. Paul also in Acts 23:3 calls the men ordered by the high priest Ananias to strike him, “whitewashed walls”. These proud men, proud

of their learning, proud of their self-righteousness, proud of being superior to everything else had met someone who was in an altogether different league from them and humbled them with questions they couldn't answer truthfully without exposing their inadequacy as supposed repositories of knowledge of all matters regarding God and the Scriptures. However this is just the beginning of Jesus's teaching and healing ministry. Jesus continues:

Verses 9-12 *But I want you to know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins.' So he said to the man, 'I tell you, get up, take your mat and go home.' He got up, took his mat and walked out in full view of them all. This amazed everyone and they praised God, saying, 'We have never seen anything like this!'*

We see now that for the man to be healed, his sins must have been forgiven. What Jesus said first must be true and the teachers of the law could not refute what he said because the healing took place. A circular argument. Jesus proclaims that He has authority to forgive sins and while the religious leaders might not have liked this being said, the evidence of its truth was before their eyes and they couldn't deny Jesus was wrong. The paralytic got up and walked, probably rolling up his bed mat, and was sent home. The crowd inside marvelled at what they had seen.... They got the spectacle that they expected. Later in John's gospel Jesus says blessed are those who believe without seeing, but here seeing is believing. Even today, there are many who say they would accept Jesus as saviour if Christians did what Jesus did. There are many reports of miraculous healings today, but good news is not reported and doesn't fit the narrative of a sceptical media.

What do we learn from this passage?

Jesus is able to forgive our sins: the Law of Moses which said that a priest was needed to intercede for us (Numbers 15) was no longer relevant. Jesus said He had come to fulfil the law, and He was the once and for all sacrifice on the cross enabling no further sacrifices of sheep, oxen, doves being necessary for forgiveness of our sins.

Jesus is divine – He was and still is able to know what people are thinking and can respond to their thoughts. That in itself was astonishing to the scribes and teachers of the Law.

We need the forgiveness of Jesus more than physical healing. This passage tells us that forgiveness is linked to healing, but neither the paralytic nor the leper in Chapter 1 asked to be forgiven their sins. All things are possible with God.

We must continue to praise and worship God. We must continue to ask for forgiveness when we do, say, or think wrong things. This includes asking for forgiveness when we omit to do or say what we should do or say.

We need friends who love us and who will do as much as they can to help us whether we are in need or whether we are just fine.

Jesus is still able to heal the sick and cure the incurables. We know He can, but we also know that very few in this country receive the kind of healing the paralytic or the leper received. If anything, Mark reveals to us that what we want or what is on our agenda may well not be what God wants or is on His agenda. Micah 6:8 says: *"He has shown you, O mortal, what is good. And what does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God."*

Next week we continue chapter 2 and Jonathan will be telling us what Jesus does next.