

St. Bride's Church of Scotland, Newtonmore

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THE SCANDAL OF FORGIVENESS

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Psalm 51:1-17

Luke 5:17-28

I wonder what it is about the good news that the church has to offer which the world we live in might find most shocking? What might be most at odds with the way that people think nowadays? We have been looking at how in Luke's gospel we find Jesus setting out his stall at the beginning of his ministry, as he seeks to attract disciples to himself. We see how he is acting as a catalyst, someone who changes what is normal and expected, and how he both attracts and repels people in what he does and says. And today, with the familiar story of the man let down through the roof, we find him at it again.

There was a strong attraction about Jesus. Luke tells us that the Pharisees and teachers of the law had come from Galilee and Judea and even Jerusalem to hear Jesus (who was then in the north of the country, so some of them had travelled a fair way), which tells us that Jesus' reputation, at least among those who were what you might call religiously aware, had spread a long way. They had come to see and hear him, and, says Luke, "the power of the Lord was with him to heal."

I find that a very intriguing phrase. The implication is that Jesus was not healing every day. Because the gospels record his healings, because they were remarkable, we can tend to think that all he did was go from place to place healing people. But this incident will show us that the restoring of sight or hearing or the power to walk or the removal of infection was just one part of the healing which Jesus brought, and he did not do it exclusively, nor did he do it in isolation from the whole of his purpose. He had not come to be an itinerant healer.

However, this day he was in healing mode, and people knew it. He was also in teaching mode. And so we see him attracting the religiously trained and aware, and attracting the crowds in great number. And he attracted the four friends and the sick man, who were prepared to go what we might think of as extreme lengths to get near enough to Jesus for him to make a difference in their lives.

When you first hear this story, what is perhaps most memorable, what sticks with you, especially if you hear the story as a child, is that the four friends made a hole in the roof. There is a sort of boys' own adventure element about it, and as a child you know that what they did was, on one level, pretty naughty. If you had made a hole in a roof, your own or someone else's, you know that you would be in trouble: bad trouble. And so there is a kind of vicarious glee in what the four friends did (or is that just me?) and there is reassurance in the knowledge that because it was to get close to Jesus, and because it showed that they cared for their friend, it was all right.

When you read the story again, with adult eyes, the roof is not the important part. The roof is just incidental. What is the important part is that Jesus said to the sick man, "Your sins are forgiven you."

That statement was what really got the attention of the crowds who were there, and particularly of the Pharisees and teachers of the law. “Who is this who is speaking blasphemies? Who can forgive sins but God alone?” When Jesus had healed on the Sabbath, that was shocking and controversial, and people asked who he thought he was to put aside the Sabbath law like that. But this time the condemnation is far stronger. Blasphemy was about as bad an accusation as you could level against anyone. Blasphemy meant that you had shown contempt or lack of reverence for God. Which in turn meant that you thought you were better than God. In the Old Testament law this could be punished by death, although the full extent of this law was not always applied. So to accuse someone of blasphemy was a bit of a big deal. And it wasn't about roofs but about forgiveness.

The people were shocked that Jesus offered forgiveness. The sick man may also have been shocked as he was expecting to be offered the chance to walk again. And this offering of forgiveness, which Jesus did repeatedly, not just in this case, is one of the things which might shock our neighbours more than anything else.

In Jesus' day, people were well aware of their need for forgiveness. They lived with a strict code, which covered their morals and their day to day practical lives, with rules about how you treated others and how you kept ritually pure. And when you live by an all-encompassing code, you are bound to fail from time to time. And when that code is given you as from God, then you will feel guilt and you will know that you need forgiveness. In Jesus' day it was supposed that many illnesses and especially disabilities, like this man's paralysis, or like being blind or deaf, were inflicted on a person because of sin – their own or their parents'. And so when people saw someone who had such an affliction, they would assume that here was a person who had displeased God. *And the person themselves might feel this too.* That was one thing that was going on here.

Another thing that was going on is what is always going on with people, even now. We do all do wrong. Whether our code comes from God, or our families, or our heroes, or ourselves, we all fail. Sometimes when we fail we can apologise to someone and make things fairly right again. But sometimes we can't – not we won't, though there are those of us who have a really hard time saying sorry, and admitting to being in the wrong - but we can't. One of the things that happens with the grief that follows a death is that people feel guilty about matters which were not sorted out and which now cannot be. And there are other times when we cannot right our wrongs, or when our attempts to do so make things worse and not better. Most of us live with a layer of guilt somewhere in our minds. This sick man would be no different from the rest of us there.

So Jesus, who had the power of God on him to heal, forgave. And shocked as the people were, their question about his words was real. *Did* he have the authority to forgive, which only God had? Because if he didn't, then what he spoke were just words, offensive words, which changed nothing. And so Jesus showed that he had the authority by completing the healing, by telling the sick man to pick up his mat and go home.

Is it easier to say “Your sins are forgiven you” or to say “Pick up your bed and go home”? If it is just words, then it is easier to say the first. No one can tell if what you have said is real or not. But if that is the case, if all you are saying is words, then it will be very hard to say the second thing, because people will know at once if nothing changes. But if what you say is not just words, then that first utterance, “Your sins are forgiven you,” may be the more difficult after all.

The people were shocked, first by his words and then by his actions, shocked with horror at the perceived blasphemy and then shocked with amazement at the healing. We, reading the story, should not be shocked. Luke has said that the power of the Lord was with Jesus to heal, and there are times in life when the first stage of healing is forgiveness. But to our neighbours that may be the most shocking thing and the hardest to hear.

We live in a time when the idea of sin and guilt has not exactly disappeared, but has almost gone underground. You might talk about your sense of guilt to those very close to you, or to a therapist, but not in public. Even the national laws that we live under do not always instil a sense of guilt when they are broken, just concern if we are caught out. This lack of acknowledgement of guilt is probably a bit of a reaction from past times, when the ideas of sin and guilt were laid very heavily on people especially by the church.

I would hate to go back to these days, the days when the church put guilt on people but forgot to offer forgiveness. The days when you might be put on the cuttie stool in front of the whole congregation and have your misdemeanours read out, enduring humiliation as your punishment, but never being assured that you were forgiven. I am glad we do not live in these days.

But there is, nowadays, a disconnect when the church talks of sin and forgiveness, because many people do not think in these terms. "Sin" nowadays is either confined to sexual wrongdoing or is used in a light way to talk about foods that are a bit self-indulgent and bad for you. Nowadays, if the church were to talk about sin, that would really shake people up a bit. The good news that we have to offer is that Jesus came into the world to save sinners, but if people don't see themselves in those terms, then they will not see the significance or the relevance of this.

And yet. When you get a chance to get close to people and really talk to them, you will find that most people live with regrets and with the knowledge that they have done things they wish they had not. And for some people they poison the present, and for some they poison the past, and for some they poison a future which they do not know how to face. If this is you, then Jesus says to you, "Friend, your sins are forgiven you." And he means it. He has the power to forgive and he has the power with that forgiveness to heal the life that is stunted by guilt and regret.

This story, which is one of a challenge which Jesus brought to his eager listeners, is also a story of challenge to us as Jesus' disciples now. How can we help people to see that what they need, what will heal lives, is the assurance of forgiveness, is a clean slate from which to go forward? The old ways of just declaring it are gone. If we do that we will meet with the question "Who do they think they are to say that?" just as Jesus did. Jesus showed the power of his words by his actions. How do we, how can we do the same? Amen.