I've got three questions I'm going to try to answer tonight. Why are we here? What are we doing? And what is all this trying to achieve? I intend the questions both on the macro, existential level, for the whole wide world, and on the micro, particular level, referring to ourselves, gathered to celebrate our patronal festival. I believe our reading from Mark's gospel, chapter 2, answers all three questions for us. Why are we here? What are we doing? And what is all this trying to achieve?

Let’s start with ‘Why are we here?’ On the face of it Mark chapter 2 looks like just another healing story from the gospels. Until you remember that there’s no such thing as just another healing story in the gospels. The miracle stories are illustrative and provocative images, just as much as the parables are. They each make a theological point that leaves us open-mouthed.

Let me suggest to you that the paralysed man in this story represents Israel. Israel’s story – what we call the Old Testament – is shaped by two themes. One is Exodus. Israel was in bondage, in slavery; and God set Israel free. The other is Exile. Israel was lost in Babylon. And God met Israel in the place of despair and brought Israel home. The difference between the two is that Egypt was the trouble Israel got into through no fault of its own. Its liberation we can call healing. Babylon, by contrast, was trouble Israel got into through its own weakness, perversity, and folly. Its liberation we can call forgiveness. At the time of Jesus, Israel was in another pickle: it was under the thumb of the Roman Empire. It had the vestiges of the covenant with God, in occupied land, puppet king and half-restored Temple.

So when Jesus looks at the paralysed man, he’s looking at the paralysed people of Israel. And he’s saying, ‘Which is it? Is this like Egypt, a straitjacket you were put in by others? Or is it like Babylon, a prison you made for yourself?’ To put it another way, what have you come to me looking for – healing? Or forgiveness? Which is easier, to say you’re forgiven, or to say you’re healed?

But I said we were going to answer the question, ‘Why are we here?’ And the answer is, because we’re paralysed. We’re looking for the liberation that only Jesus can bring. The thing we’re not sure about, most of us, is this. Which is it? Are we paralysed because of the straitjacket we’ve been put in by others? Or are we paralysed because of the prison in which we’ve put ourselves? We’re not sure. And that’s why we’re here. We’ve come to find out. And we’ve come to hear Jesus say, here’s forgiveness. And here’s healing. Which is easier? Oooof: that’s a difficult one. I’ll tell you what, I’ll take both, and get back to you.

Look me in the eye tonight and I’ll ask you the same question. What was it you came out needing tonight? Forgiveness? Or healing? St Martin’s is a community of people who don’t always know the answer to that question. But who cherish one another as we discover the courage to find out. Our society is paralysed in exactly the same way. Which is why what we’re doing here matters so much. If we can find some answers, it could be a whole lot more than just us that find a blessing. We, like Israel, are a community of the paralysed. But like the one on the stretcher, we’re about to get a lot more than we bargained for.

Ok, let’s turn to question two. What are we doing? What are we doing when we get together and some of us put on robes and we sing ancient and modern music and read from the Bible and all the
The four stretcher-bearers see that there’s a formidable barrier between Jesus and the one he’s come to save, the paralysed man, or Israel as we’ve already called him. And so what do the stretcher-bearers do? They break through that barrier from the top down. Think about what this scene is enacting and playfully recasting. The whole gospel story, the whole of what Jesus is doing, is breaking through the barrier between God and humanity, opening up the ceiling, coming down through the roof and coming to dwell among us. So this story is about these stretcher-bearers imitating what Jesus is all about. But they don’t just naively or slavishly imitate: they playfully improvise, turning the tables on Jesus by making him the one on earth and themselves the ones coming down from heaven. It’s actually hilarious, if we weren’t so used to being solemn reading the Bible. They’re practically taking the mickey.

These stretcher-bearers answer the question of what we’re doing right now. We’re seeking to imitate those stretcher bearers. We’re constantly trying to break through barriers between people and God, barriers of their own or of others’ making. Like the stretcher-bearers we’re constantly seeking to improvise ways to imitate Jesus and at the same time bring people to Jesus to receive the healing and forgiveness only he can give. That’s the answer to the question ‘What are we doing?’

And so to the last question: What is all this trying to achieve? The paralytic in Mark chapter 2 begins the story as a burden and ends it as a carrier of the burdens of others. Mark tells us that it took four people to carry the paralysed man. In other words four people were bent out of shape in order to get one man into shape. I wonder how many people our paralysis bends out of shape. I wonder, when we look at our lives, whether our paralysis is proving a burden to four people; maybe a whole host more. But look at the end of the story. It says the man stood up, took his mat and went home. He was carrying his own stretcher. And what possible reason could there be for that unless he fully intended to use that stretcher to carry someone else in their paralysis? Right at the beginning of his gospel, Mark gives us a picture of resurrection. Jesus transforms this man and every one of his relationships.

My favorite children’s story is Now One Foot, Now the Other, by Tomie dePaola. It tells the story of Bobby. Bobby’s named after his beloved grandfather, Bob. Bobby’s a toddler. His favorite game is to pile all his building blocks, one on top of another, till they rise high into the air. At the very top he puts the one with an elephant painted on the side. He calls it the elephant block. As Bobby begins to get taller, his grandfather Bob teaches Bobby to walk, patiently standing behind him and saying, “Now one foot, now the other. Now one foot, now the other” – hour after hour. You see young Bobby’s body folded into his grandfather’s as they walk together.

One day Bob has a stroke. Bobby’s lost his best friend. It’s a terrible ache and sadness. After a long time Bob returns from the hospital. But Bob’s unable to speak or register things spoken to him. Bobby, now about 5, is determined to restore their relationship. But Bobby gets no response from his grandfather for many weeks. One day Bobby is building the high tower of building blocks while Bob watches rather vacantly from the chair beside him. But then, amazingly but unmistakably, just as he is nearing the very top, Bobby hears his grandfather mumble the words “Elephant... block.” Now Bobby knows Bob is going to get better. As the recovery gains pace, Bob takes his grandson outside to learn to walk again. In a glorious reversal of the earlier scene, Bob’s body is folded into his grandson’s as he relearns to make each tentative step. The story ends with young Bobby saying to Bob the very words Bob had once said to his grandson: ‘Now one foot, now the other.’ Bobby begins the story as a pupil and ends it as a teacher.

And that answers the third question, ‘What is all this – the church, St Martin-in-the-Fields, all the energy and structure and organization and health and safety and regulation and good practice trying to achieve?’ This is what. It’s about creating spaces and opportunities where the Holy Spirit turns people from burdens into carriers.
Jesus carries us, and in allowing ourselves to be carried by him, we’re transformed from burdens on others into people who carry others and carry the burdens of others. We’ve been carried by others and by Jesus. They’ve been Jesus for us. And now we see ourselves carrying others and becoming Jesus for them. And one day we’ll be a burden again; but by that time, like Bob and Bobby, we’ll have got so confused in the dance of carrying and being carried that we’ll no longer be able to tell which is which. That’s what it means to be a community of resurrection. That’s what the Bible calls the kingdom of God.

And that’s how we honour our patron saint. For St Martin thought he was carrying the burden of a beggar, by splitting his cloak — but he discovered in the process that the beggar was none other than Christ, the one who was carrying and healing and forgiving and resurrecting him. What it’s all about is creating spaces and opportunities for the Holy Spirit to do its work. St Martin-in-the-Fields doesn’t heal or forgive anybody: it creates spaces and opportunities for people to encounter the forgiveness and healing of God in Christ. As in this story, we bring people to Jesus; we take away the barriers; we make the invitation, we provide the setting and the hospitality — and Jesus does the rest.

So that’s our three questions. Why are we here? Because we’re paralysed, needing a mixture of healing and forgiveness. What are we doing? We’re practising to become improvisers on the way God redeems the world. What’s all this trying to achieve? We’re seeking to create spaces where the Holy Spirit makes its mischief and brings about resurrection.

Jesus sees the paralysed man, and he hears the critics all around, and he says, ‘Which is easier? To say “Your sins are forgiven,” or to say, “Stand up and walk”?’ And that’s a question for us. Which is easier – to be a stretcher-bearer seeking healing or to be a burden seeking forgiveness? Thanks be to God that St Martin-in-the-Fields is a community of both, where we each have this disarming habit of being a burden one week, and a carrier the next, of realizing our need for healing one week, and forgiveness the next, in Egypt one week, in Babylon the next, now one foot, now the other. That’s how it’s always been here. And, in the power of the Spirit, that’s how it always will be.