
Making Jesus Smile

Mark 2.1-12

A Sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on February 19 2006 by the Revd Canon Dr Sam Wells

You'd think that reading the Bible was the simplest thing. But in fact it's something we need to learn how to do. The story of the healing of the paralytic in today's gospel is a good example. If you're used to the gospels, you hardly notice the miraculous healing: Jesus seems to perform so many healings that you almost glaze over. Huh – another healing. There's also a controversy with the scribes. But Jesus is like Dick Cheney – never out of the papers, always getting in trouble, so that seems no big deal. Your attention strays to the less regular parts of the story, the link between healing and forgiveness, and the curious entry through the roof. But if you'd never read the story before you'd immediately think – who's this guy who can heal people, just like that? And why doesn't everyone give him a standing ovation?

Learning to read the Bible means avoiding both these extremes – neither reading wearily, for the 100th time, and saying 'It's just a healing'; nor pretending it's the first time, and saying 'It's a *healing* - everybody!' Learning to read the Bible means paying close attention to the details of the story, and then setting those details in the context of the whole story and style and sweep of God's dealing with the world. So, let's look at the details of this story, and then finish by seeing how those details fit in to God's whole way of dealing with the world.

Let's start with the 4 friends carrying the paralyzed man on a mat and digging through the roof to get to Jesus. Think for a moment about the drama of this event. There are a number of barriers between the paralyzed man and Jesus. One is the man's paralysis. You could say the paralyzed man represents Israel in the time of Jesus' ministry. Does Israel need healing, in other words does Israel need cleansing of the demon Rome, the paralyzing and crippling power of the alien invader, and does Israel need a Messiah to drive out the Romans, finally to end her internal Exile and restore her to fully-functioning health, to stand on her two feet again and 'go home' like the man at the end of the parable? Or does Israel need not healing but forgiveness, in other words are Israel's problems not so much external as internal, in separation from God, and is Israel's paralysis less about the Romans than about trying to operate while still estranged from God? This is a question at the very heart of the New Testament.

Another barrier between the paralyzed man and Jesus is the huge crowd of people, so dense that the stretcher bearers can't get through. And at the center of the crowd is this infuriating group of scribes who seem to jump on Jesus every time he does something that sets people free. Why are the scribes so cross? Well think about who the scribes are. They are the Conference, Diocesan and Presbytery administrators, the Divinity Faculty, the Christian journal editors, the people who made a healthy living out of religion. People like me, in fact. And these people muttered about Jesus – they set up emergency meetings, wrote strongly-worded editorials in journals, raised points of order at faculty councils, and whispered that the budget for next year could still be subject to change – all the kinds of things administrators do when they are riled. This story looks like a healing issue between Jesus and the paralyzed man, but behind it lies a control issue between the scribes and the crowd. This is the first time in his gospel that Mark mentions the crowd, but they get another 37 mentions, so they're pretty important to the story. It was the scribes who controlled whether sins were forgiven and debts released. This was the source of their social power. If Jesus was going to go round announcing that sins were forgiven, the social power of the scribes would be over. Jesus isn't just setting the paralysed man free; he is setting the crowd free as well.

So paralysis, crowd and scribes are all barriers. And the last barrier is the roof itself. The roof is the easiest barrier to deal with: it takes neither authority nor miraculous power, but imagination and elbow grease. This is a story describing how the gospel takes away every barrier between us and God, and how when we finally come into God's presence, we are set free. The 4 friends symbolically remove the 'roof' – that which stands between earth and heaven. Then Jesus, the heavenly Son of Man, takes away all that might paralyse us in every other way. The whole scene is a summary of Jesus' mission to Israel. Jesus transforms the paralysed man from a burden into a carrier, from a person carried on a mat to a person who carries a mat, a person who is now in a position to carry others on that mat. The story shows us that if we bring people to Jesus, Jesus will do the rest.

Let's look a little closer at what the four stretcher bearers do in coming through the roof. Jesus is 'down there', apparently out of reach; and they break through the barrier to reach him. You could say they *break through the barrier and come down from heaven to earth*. Think about this gesture. It's a very significant one. Why? Because the whole gospel is about Jesus breaking through the barrier between God and humanity and coming down from heaven to earth. And here the four stretcher bearers do pretty much what Jesus did. They imitate Jesus. And what is Jesus' reaction? Jesus is charmed. You can imagine him smiling, a kind of wry, ironic smile, when he realizes these friends are imitating him. Think of a professor smiling when she recognizes one of her stock phrases in her graduate student's dissertation, even though the graduate student hadn't put it there on purpose. Think of a father smiling when he sees his daughter flick her head back or open her eyes slowly and sweetly, just like her mother does, but entirely unconsciously. Think of a sophomore receiving a valentine's card, and chuckling as he reads a private joke that only makes sense in the light of a valentine's card he sent to the same person exactly a year before. 'Ah, you remembered; you understand; I don't need to explain to you', says Jesus. These four stretcher bearers have come from heaven to earth. They have re-enacted the incarnation. Jesus smiles. Nothing gives him greater pleasure.

A few years ago there was a great campaign with its own slogan and bumper sticker – WWJD: 'What would Jesus do?' This initially sounds like a short cut guide to doing the right thing, but it became open to ridicule. The reason is that it tries to ask how we get out of a problem without considering how we got into it. For example, I may be a high flying international financier who has borrowed stocks from 15 different countries simultaneously and suddenly there's a market crash and I'm trying to offload my stocks and I wonder whether I should have a social conscience and offload the ones from the poor countries first or whether I should keep myself in business by selling for a better return in the rich countries. 'What would Jesus do?' is a bit of a silly question, because it's hard to imagine Jesus getting into such a crazy situation in the first place, given what he said about keeping promises and building houses on rock and how he spent most of his time with the poor. An Irish friend of mine likes the story of the man who was asked for directions to Waterford and said 'Ah, if I wanted to go to Waterford I wouldn't start from here'. That's the problem with WWJD – 9 times out of 10 you wouldn't start from here. YWSH. What finally did for WWJD was the revival of interest in the shaggy dog with the goofy detective assistants. The interesting question, it turned out, really was, WWSD: 'What would Scooby Doo?'

Rather than using Jesus as a kind of safety valve, an extra gallon of gasoline we can draw on when we forgot to fill up the tank one morning, we should be thinking like the 4 stretcher bearers, 'What is the kind of gesture that makes Jesus smile because he recognizes himself in it?' We can all think of these gestures pretty easily, especially when they have been captured in memorable photographs. Think of Tianenmen Square in Beijing in 1989, and that man who stood still while 4 tanks rumbled mercilessly towards him. Jesus recognizes himself in that gesture, because he stood still before the rumbling power of Roman oppression and the Jerusalem authorities' plotting and the relentlessness of human sin. Think of the Twin Towers on 9/11, and the firefighter clambering up the stairs while thousands hurtled downwards to save their lives. Jesus recognizes himself in that firefighter, because he too put his life at stake to rescue us from the wreckage of the Fall. Think of the sinking of the passenger ferry the *Herald of Free Enterprise* in Zeebrugge harbour in 1987 and the man who lay between two broken corridors and made himself a human bridge at the cost of his own life so that others could walk over him to safety. Jesus recognizes himself in that man because he too is a bridge that others cross to safety at the cost of his own life. And think of Gordon Wilson who forgave the IRA for blowing up his daughter Marie at Enniskillen in Northern Ireland in 1987. Jesus recognizes himself in this gesture because he too at the moment of his death said 'Father forgive them for they know not what they do.' These are all gestures that are disarming because Christ so instantly recognizes them. None of those making the gestures thought what they were doing was a big deal; like the 4 stretcher bearers breaking through the roof, these people put their inhibitions and personal anxieties to one side and simply did what needed to be done. These people made Jesus smile, because their actions resembled his.

The 4 stretcher bearers in today's gospel join a great company of those in the gospels who disarm Jesus by imitating his life in ways that make him smile. Think of the poor widow who put two small copper coins into the Temple treasury in Jerusalem, in the story often known as the 'widow's mite'. Jesus commends her because she gave everything she had to the Temple, the place where Jews became reconciled with God. Likewise Jesus

gave everything he had to reconcile the Jews with God. Think of the Syro-Phoenician woman who tells Jesus that 'even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs'. She reminds Jesus that there is a place in the kingdom for Gentiles. She's the only person who ever changes Jesus' mind, because she accepts the humiliation of speaking the truth, just as Jesus later does in Jerusalem. And think of the woman who anoints Jesus at Bethany. Jesus commends her because she alone realizes he is soon to die and because her extravagance imitates the extravagance of God's love for us in him.

So those are some of the details of the story – the paralyzed man is like Israel, forgiveness breaks the stranglehold of the scribes, the descent through the roof is an imitation of Jesus' descent from heaven to earth, the man's raising to health is a foretaste of Jesus' resurrection. I said I would finish by putting those details into the context of the whole story of God. So here goes.

I want you to notice the shape of this story. The paralysed man is brought to Jesus; Jesus breaks off to have it out with the scribes; and then Jesus turns back to the paralysed man and heals him. In other words, the scribal controversy about forgiveness is sandwiched between two halves of a story about healing. The technical word for sandwiching is intercalation. Mark's gospel does it repeatedly. The story of the healing of the woman with hemorrhages is sandwiched or intercalated between two halves of the healing of Jairus' daughter. The death of John the Baptist is sandwiched between the sending out of the twelve disciples on mission and their return. Jesus' cleansing of the Temple is sandwiched between his cursing of the fig tree and his return to find the fig tree withered. Jesus' anointing by the woman at Bethany is sandwiched between the chief priests and scribes searching for a way to arrest Jesus and Judas' coming to the chief priests to seal the deal. Peter's denial of Jesus is sandwiched between Jesus' faithfulness before the Jerusalem authorities and his faithfulness before Pontius Pilate.

What these intercalations do is to illuminate one story in the light of the other. In the case of the paralysed man, the intercalation makes clear that you can't think about healing and forgiveness independently of one another. Forgiveness names the fundamental resolution of our estrangement from God; but healing names those aspects and consequences of sin that take longer to repair. Forgiveness requires confession, but healing needs intercession. Forgiveness removes the poison, but healing restores the body. Forgiveness ends the war, but healing makes the peace. To those who have found healing, this story says: great – but is it founded on forgiveness? To those who have found forgiveness this story says: great – but has it issued in healing?

Intercalation is more than a literary device. It is the whole perspective of the gospel. Mark's gospel is written during a time window: and that window is between Jesus' disappearance at the end of the gospel and his reappearance at the end of time; between his first coming and his second coming; between his resurrection and our resurrection. Our lives, the life of the Church, are sandwiched between God's mighty acts, and can only be understood in the light of them. And the way to live our lives, personally and corporately, is to follow the 4 friends of the paralyzed man – to perform gestures that imitate the outside parts of the sandwich. These gestures may be dramatic, like the anointing, or almost invisible, like the widow's mite; they may be messy, like digging up the roof, or argumentative, like the words of the Syro-Phoenician woman. But whatever your gesture is, it will be known by two things. It will be instantly recognizable by Jesus and by everyone who knows him. And, most of all, it will make Jesus smile – knowingly, wily, ironically – and wonderfully.