

Sunday 12th February 2006 Epiphany 7B Healing and Forgiveness.  
Rob Lamerton

Readings:

Isaiah 43: 18-25

Psalm 41 page 264

2 Corinthians 1:16-22

Mark 2:1-12

As we move through the weeks of Epiphany there is a new thing revealed "an epiphany" about God's activity in Jesus! Last week we discovered that Jesus EVEN overcomes Leprosy. This week the discovery is that Jesus EVEN forgives sin. In each case these were things that ONLY God could do! His epiphany as the agent of God continues to unfold.

In the opening chapter of Mark's gospel we were first told who Jesus really was and then shown how some typical words and actions of Jesus revealed this identity! There were also efforts by Jesus to conceal his identity by encouraging people not to tell about him! This trend in the first part of Mark is called the "Messianic Secret" intended to tone down the idea of the Messiah until he is fully revealed on the cross.

[reference DE Nineham "St Mark"]

Now something new occurs as we embark on this new stage of the gospel! The ministry of Jesus was wholly helpful and healing but even if people did not fully understand or penetrate it's secret, how did they come to respond to it with hostility hatred and persecution — and of course the first readers of the story would have seen how this unfolded!

This was one of the questions about the ministry of Jesus which was faced by the early Christian followers. How did a good man get to be rejected?

St Mark begins to give his answer to this question in this section of the gospel from ch. 2.1 to ch 3.6 which consists of five stories of conflict between Jesus and the Jewish authorities.

1. The stories show that opposition to Jesus came NOT from the ordinary Jewish people but from authorities who had religious vested interests to maintain.

2. The stories make clear the true character and grounds for the opposition to Jesus showing that it arose from the misunderstanding and short sightedness on the part of the authorities and not from any fault on the part of Jesus himself.

These new stories about Jesus may well have been a collection well before they reached their place in the gospel.

So we are looking at the first of these about Healing and Forgiveness! And as we do I wonder about the recent uproar about the cartoons depicting the prophet Mohammed as well as the debate about RU486 the so called "abortion drug". Can we move on from the hard words and violence to a place of respect and forgiveness of discussion, and negotiation. Can we do this in other areas of our lives at home and at work?

In the gospel we first of all see the faith and determined action of the man and his friends. I always imagine some in the crowd telling them to "get off that roof!" but Jesus recognizes in their actions a desperation... a genuine search for help!

The houses of Jesus day usually had a flight of stone steps on the outside leading to the roof which was flat and made of sticks and packed earth. So access was easy and breaking through the roof was not difficult. I always had trouble with this story as a child because I imagined a pitched roof with terra cotta tiles and thought "how awkward " surely it would have been easier to just go through the window or even the back door!"

It is possible that the removal of the roof may even be a mistranslation of the Aramaic which really meant "they brought him up on to the roof".

Then:

Jesus calls the man "Son" "Son, your sins are forgiven" "Son" is a term of endearment... there is no reprimand here...

"your sins are forgiven"

Now if we took our crippled friend to a doctor today and the doctor said "Your sins are forgiven " we would be bewildered and probably somewhat angry but Sins (one's failures to please God) were thought to be the reason for a person's illness. The scribes and traditional Jews would have believed sins could ONLY be forgiven if a sacrifice was made in the Temple or some good work would pay the debt. Forgiveness was therefore only possible by fulfilling the legal requirement. The idea that forgiveness was a gracious act of God was out of the question for them! They believed forgiveness was earned! So the image of Jesus forgiving sins without any sacrifice or payment tells us about the very different nature of God! (St Paul tells us that Christ is God's YES! to us — God's desire is to affirm.)

The scribes say nothing but we are told that they were questioning in their hearts "Why does this fellow speak in this way? It is blasphemy! Who can forgive sins but God alone?" Jesus "perceived in his Spirit that they were discussing these things" and confronted them. Of course he would be aware that they objected!

The question about whether it is easier to heal or to forgive is baffling but it seems to me that for the crowd sickness was as a result of sin and so Jesus deals with what is the root cause. The man's paralysis was the symptom of something deeper.

Naturally Jesus deals with the cause rather than the symptom.

Just yesterday a woman was telling Sandy and myself how she had gone to the doctor with headaches and that her medical practitioner had discerned a back problem which dated from her childhood. As he started treating the back problem the headaches started to recede. So often the reverse happens. The symptoms are treated while the real issue goes undiagnosed.

The same occurs in many other areas of life! We deal with the side issues rather than getting to grips with the problem.

That is why I ask the question "What were the nature of this man's sins? Was there some trauma in his background? Did he just have a bad back? Had he had a miserable life like the young woman I mention in the pewsheet? Did he have a real medical condition? Was he paralysed by a fear of God's

unforgiveness only to discover that God through Jesus called him "Son".

Then Jesus declares that this all happened "so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins". "Son of Man" can mean simply "man" or as they say in Ireland "every mother's son" and it may mean that Jesus is saying that just as God forgives sins so should every person! Isn't that what we say in the Lord's Prayer? Forgive as we forgive!...

This term "Son of Man" does not seem to be used in Mark's gospel to describe the Messiah until AFTER his disciples recognize him to be the Messiah in ch 8.

Finally we have the man standing up and taking up his mat and leaving the house "The paralytic has left the building"... and we find that amazement overcomes them — they glorify God saying "We have never seen any thing like this!"

What Jesus reveals is the nature of God who forgives AND that forgiveness is the beginning of healing. Forgiveness does not mean being nice and putting everything back as it was. Last week I spoke about a young man who had been an awful lot of trouble to his family. Finally he has been charged by the police and committed to do something about his drinking, drug taking and his anger.

His mother has had to learn that to forgive means to move on! That she can forgive and NOT give in and allow him back home.

There is something of the healing of the paralytic here! Jesus says "Son, your sins are forgiven!" but then the man is told "Stand up, take up your mat and walk". I wonder what might go through his mind at a time like that? What will happen? Will I be able to do it? Can I stand on my own two feet?

It is only by giving it a go will he find out! Often the hardest thing about forgiveness is forgiving ourselves... and being game enough to discover that there is life when we get out of bed! and "seize the day".

Isaiah the prophet made known God's word to the people:

18 Do not remember the former things,  
or consider the things of old.

25 I, I am He  
who blots out your transgressions for my own sake,  
and I will not remember your sins.

He was talking about the people leaving captivity — a re run of the leaving of Egypt and beginning in a NEW PROMISED LAND.

The people were to look for not a restoration of former things BUT an entirely new thing as they returned home from captivity.

One of the things I believe we need to do is grab hold of the forgiveness God gives. Possibly we can talk to a priest or spiritual director about sins which paralyse us and hold us back and be reassured again in a form of confession that we can discover liberation and healing in our relationship with God.