

Attacking the debt system: the Pharisees (Mark 2: 1-12)

Jesus Heals a Paralytic

2When he returned to Capernaum after some days, it was reported that he was at home. 2So many gathered around that there was no longer room for them, not even in front of the door; and he was speaking the word to them. 3Then some people came bringing to him a paralysed man, carried by four of them. 4And when they could not bring him to Jesus because of the crowd, they removed the roof above him; and after having dug through it, they let down the mat on which the paralytic lay. 5When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, 'Son, your sins are forgiven.' 6Now some of the scribes were sitting there, questioning in their hearts, 7'Why does this fellow speak in this way? It is blasphemy! Who can forgive sins but God alone?' 8At once Jesus perceived in his spirit that they were discussing these questions among themselves; and he said to them, 'Why do you raise such questions in your hearts? 9Which is easier, to say to the paralytic, "Your sins are forgiven", or to say, "Stand up and take your mat and walk"? 10But so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins'—he said to the paralytic— 11'I say to you, stand up, take your mat and go to your home.' 12And he stood up, and immediately took the mat and went out before all of them; so that they were all amazed and glorified God, saying 'We have never seen anything like this!'

(Translation © Lawrence Moore, *Mark for Missional Disciples*, Walking the Walk Publications, 2018)

Commentary

Jesus was definitely out to turn the world upside down, and can't have been disappointed! The healing of the paralytic belongs to the section that begins with the exorcism of the unclean spirit from the man in the synagogue at Capernaum, the healing of Peter's mother-in-law, and the cleansing of the leper. Mark hurries us from incident to incident, showing how, from the very first, Jesus' ministry (significantly in the synagogues) provokes conflict with the scribes. In last week's gospel text, Jesus usurps the priestly authority to declare lepers clean. This week, he goes even further: he attacks their sole claim to forgive sin, and is declared a blasphemer (2:7). This is the charge on which he will eventually be executed. From the outset, in other words, the shadow of the cross hangs over all that Jesus is doing.

Taking on the powers

This isn't an attempt to read something clever or fanciful into the texts. Jesus' messianic ministry is a quite deliberate taking on of the

powers of the day that imprison and exclude – in particular, the purity system. The purity system requires forgiveness; the debt system means that it can only be obtained through payment for a sacrifice. Forgiveness under the debt system is an economic industry – and Jesus calls it robbery (11:17). He is wresting control of the levers of power from the power-holders, and they don't like it one bit! Mark goes to extraordinary lengths to tell us that to be the Messiah meant going to the cross, tracking its necessity through Jesus' ministry.

Entering into the story

This is a great story for preaching, isn't it? Think of the various characters and what's going on for them:

The paralytic: he's totally helpless. He says nothing throughout the account, yet imagine the conversations that must have gone on. They arrive at the one-roomed house, and there is simply no way that they're going to get through the crowd that's spilled out into the street. Imagine his despair – but also his resignation. After all, this is what *always* happens to him. No luck: "Ok guys – that was really thoughtful of you. Thank you, but let's just go home!"

Then there are *the friends* – and what amazing, determined friends! Which was the eternal optimist, I wonder? "No problem – we'll get you in!" "Oh yes? Just how do you imagine we'll manage that?" "Ummm ... I know! Come on – up on the roof!" "The *roof*? How is that going to help?" "Easy! All we have to do is dig through it ..."

And what about *the crowd*? Imagine the scene: they're all desperate to get inside, and, even though they're not English, with an obsession for orderly queues, there's still protocol here. Here are 4 men, carrying a stretcher, trying to get through. But wait a moment! They're not trying for the door – they're heading for the roof! That's ok, then ...

Try being *the house owner* just for a moment. Just a poor man and his family, in a single-roomed dwelling. What on earth possessed him to invite Jesus in and let him preach?! Bad mistake! Just look at the crowds – wall-to-wall people filling every available space, wife looking

daggers at him - and now the roof's starting to fall in ...

Then there are *the scribes*, huddled against a wall in disapproval, bitter at all the fuss and stir Jesus is causing, trying desperately to avoid touching anyone who might be unclean and contaminate them.

And Jesus? Here he is, doing his best to preach in some fairly adverse circumstances, and he's showered with bits of falling roof. Suddenly, there's a great big hole, letting the light in. But only for a moment, because then the light's blocked, by ... hey, someone's lowering a stretcher down! The crowd push and shove to make space, and this stretcher lands at Jesus' feet, with the paralytic on it. Jesus looks at him, then up at the hole where the roof used to be, to see 4 excited, anxious faces peering down expectantly ...

“Your sins are forgiven!”

Then there's all the drama of the healing itself. Jesus doesn't engage the man in conversation – he looks at the friends, sees their determination and faith, and tells the man straight out, “Your sins are forgiven!” Everyone would have been thinking the same thing: (a) “I wonder what he did to be lying on the stretcher? It must have been something serious for God to punish him like this!” (b) “Did I hear right? Did Jesus just say, ‘Your sins are forgiven’? Who can forgive sins except God alone? And who can pronounce someone released from sin except the scribes and priests – and *then* only after the proper sacrifices have been bought and offered?”

Jesus, of course, knows exactly what he's doing. He turns, not to the crowds, but to the scribes, and asks, “If this man's illness has to do with sin, as everyone supposes, which is easier to say? ‘Your sins are forgiven’, or to *demonstrate* that they're forgiven and tell him to walk? The latter? Alright – I'll prove to you that I have authority to forgive sin!” And turning to the man, he orders him to stand up, roll up his mat, and walk! And he *does*! No wonder they all glorified God, saying, “We've never seen anything like this!”

“Getting it”

It's a wonderful drama. But there are also all sorts of other things

happening in this story.

1. Mark is telling us that Jesus can forgive sins because he is the Son of God. This is why it is appropriate for Mark's Christian community to *worship* Jesus – because he is God.
2. Two unique “characters” make their appearance in this pericope. The first is “the crowd” (v4). Mark uses a characteristic and unusual phrase, *ochlos*, rather than the more usual and common *laos*. The crowd is a collective actor. They follow Jesus, hear him, witness what he says and does. He teaches them. He is open to them and welcomes them. He doesn't demand that they become disciples, but tells them that the kingdom is theirs. Ultimately, the authorities are able to manipulate them and use them to kill Jesus. The Korean theologian Ahn Byung-mu is almost certainly correct in identifying two important characteristics of “the crowd”. The first is that they are poor and unimportant. The word usually refers to the camp followers who perform the menial tasks required for soldiers' daily living.
3. Secondly, he identifies them with the *am ha'aretz* – “people of the land”. This was a term originally referring to those Jews who remained in Judea during the exile. They missed out on the Second Exodus – the return. They were second-class citizens. By Jesus' time, the term was one of abuse. Pharisees were expressly forbidden to associate with the *am ha'aretz* – yet these are the people among whom Jesus lives and ministers.
4. The second is the Danielic Son of Man (v10). Jesus uses this as a term of self-designation, which is why the term (which meant, simply “a human being” – “a bloke”) becomes a Christological title. Again, while Mark does not have a developed theology of the pre-existence of Jesus in terms of the *Logos*, for example, he is clear that Jesus is no mere prophet, but a heavenly being worthy of worship – the divine Son of God.
5. As with the leper, Jesus attacks the scribal monopoly on the ritual forgiveness of sins, which was linked to the purity code and, because of the financial costs involved in sacrifice, was an added burden on the poorest.
6. Jesus will be tried as a blasphemer, because he presumes to do

something only God can do – forgive sins. Yet the healing vindicates Jesus' authority to forgive sins – and his implicit claim to divinity. His eventual death will therefore be an illegal murder.

Going deeper into the text (Mark 2: 1-12)

Imagine four men sitting in a bar. There is not much chatting; they just sit in stunned silence with their beer. The sipping of the beer is punctuated by one of them shaking their heads, and muttering in disbelief,

"Can't believe we did that! What were we thinking?"

What they did was to carry their closest mate to Jesus. They were beside themselves with worry, fear and love for their friend, who had been sick ever since falling off the roof at work. And because northern Galilean blokes are not great at putting emotions into words, they'd all expressed their concerns in the only way that made sense at the time: they each grabbed a corner of the sleeping mat and marched off to see Jesus.

"Can't believe we did that! What were we thinking?"

They shake their heads as they start on their second pint, and remember. When they got there, they were horrified to see the largest crowd imaginable pushing and shoving to see and hear Jesus. Compelled by love for their friend, they found themselves doing the unimaginable: they clambered up on to the roof, carrying the near dead weight of their very sick mate, and promptly began to dig through the roof. It took a good 10 minutes, and they went at it hammer and tongs before the guy who owned the house could come up and stop them. Then, with the sweat pouring off them, they lowered their mate down through the hole. It was only when they looked down at the astonished faces looking back up at them that reality dawned.

"Can't believe we did that! What were we thinking?"

"What the hell did you do that for, you eejits?" screamed the house

owner. They had muttered their apologies and sloped off, promising to come back tomorrow and make good the damage they had done. They had walked to the bar with the eyes of their neighbours on them and their whispered comments not quite reaching their ears, but sounding like,

"Can't believe you did that! What were you thinking?"

What they remembered, though, as they sat at their bench, nursing their drinks, was that the Pharisees had said nothing to them. They just seemed to radiate a palpable displeasure at such a wanton show of emotion. But Jesus said, in a booming voice that everyone could hear, that their friend was healed, before pointing at them and saying, as he smiled, "...because of you - your faith, your actions!" And they all swore that he had winked as he whispered,

"Can't believe you did that, lads!"

For reflection:

Jesus' reaction to such human emotion in the face of suffering and need was typical of his response to people experiencing real life and having to cope with raw emotion. It contrasted with the aloofness of the Pharisees, who saw it as a legal test case and appeared unmoved by the suffering, by contrast. At least, we're never let into their emotions much. What sort of response to suffering and need does our own picture of God provoke? Does it engage with where people are? Do we respond to their situations with compassion? Or is our response like that of the Pharisees in this incident: as far as the crowds, the four friends, and the paralytic man, simply irrelevant?

All age worship ideas Mark 2: 1-12 (A)

Theme: Stepping into life

Activity: create a small obstacle course in whatever space you have available – just small cones, upturned waste paper bins, bean bags whatever you have to hand. Then invite helpers and pair them up so you

have one blindfolded and one who calls to guide their steps. You can do this as a timed exercise or a race to make it fun – though it can get a bit chaotic if you have more than two people calling out directions...

Reflections: Jesus speaks words of forgiveness and words of healing over the man on the mat. Sin and disease are intrinsic because they represent the powers at work in the world that deny the fullness of life that God promises to all.

Jesus is challenged as to the authority by which he speaks forgiveness but his response though exciting, life affirming and gracious is also a damning indictment of those who held position of religious authority – the question is not by what authority he says/does these things but by whose authority they deny him and the kingdom life he affirms. Just as Jesus speaks forgiveness and healing so his followers must do the same – this isn't about lip service it is actively working against the forces that deny life and seeking to restore hope, affirm life for all and promote justice and equality.

Jesus calls the man out of the dark state he is in into the light of the life he offers.

What forgiveness may have meant for the man on the mat is that there was no longer anything holding him back from the fullness of life that was his in God. He didn't have to go and wash a certain way or do any purification or sacrificial acts. His coming to Jesus was the sign that he, and his friends, saw something of the mercy of God in this man. As he is forgiven so he is healed and is able to walk away from the home by the front door – stepping into a whole new way of life.

Today we can step into the world, into the life that Jesus has claimed for us through his life, his incarnation and his death and not only is that good news for us but we become good news for the world because the hope of Christ is set in us. We become the light bearers that lead others from darkness. So first and foremost we become good news for the poor, for the broken, for the least and the last. As we step into this new life for ourselves so we are stepping into Jesus new life for the people who need him most. That means we oppose what he opposes, challenge what he challenges, walk in the path of forgiveness and reconciliation where there is division, be the vessels of healing where there is hurt and suffering.

What we learn from this passage is that doing good as Jesus does is not a sure way to successful church in fact it could easily be the opposite. Whenever Jesus did good he met opposition, people trying to catch him out but he remained obedient to the charge God laid on his heart. If we are to follow then he calls us to do the same.

Creative Prayer

Bubbles: You can always find a reason for bubbles! No? Just me then... Invite people to think about the things they need to let go of. Feelings of guilt, past hurts, resentments, or simply things that have held them back from following Jesus or stepping into the life he makes possible. As we breathe out those things the bubbles that are created represent the temporary nature of those things and their fragility in the face of the Kingdom of God. Some background music might help the mood but this can be a powerful experience for people. Might be worth having some tissues to hand.

Responsive prayer: Last year, I found an old wardrobe in the basement of our church. I took the back and the base off and used that now spare wood to make the structure free standing and sound. We used the wardrobe to invite people to reflect on what God might be calling them to step into whether that be to become a follower of Jesus or to take a new, risky step in their discipleship. If it was appropriate for them they could come and open the doors and walk through the wardrobe. On the other side were a few people who simply stood and prayed for each individual that journeyed through. They did not speak or lay hands but simply affirmed what God was doing. There were other members available to offer more specific prayers if needed in an alternate space. We found most people came through the doors and for quite a number of those it began a pathway into new ministry, service and experience.

Music:

You alone can rescue (Matt Redman)

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aDQeREdlw_4

Oceans (Where feet may fall) (Hillsong)

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dy9nwe9_xzw

All age worship ideas Mark 2: 1-12 (B)

One of the keys to good all age worship is to keep it simple and relatively short. Ideally aim for a service of 45-50 minutes. That's not to say a service can't be longer but if you are thinking of 1hr30+ think carefully about your use of space and above all else be creative, take risks and have fun – partying is integral to the kingdom but we'll leave that for a year on Luke...

Theme: Is the church sometimes an obstacle to an encounter with Jesus?

Film/Story clip: In Disney's Sleeping Beauty, Prince Philip has to show grit and determination as he battles thorns and a monstrous Maleficent to reach the sleeping princess and give her the all important true love's kiss thus restoring life to the kingdom. Love wins the day and they all live happily ever after!

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JmM-XX8atIQ>

Reflections: The story of the paralytic man covers several themes. The friends and the man himself show real determination to get to Jesus. There is no space, the impression is they cannot get near the door but they cannot wait so they climb on the roof and pull it apart to lower their friend directly to where Jesus sits.

We might think people are no longer interested in Jesus otherwise they would be banging on the doors of our churches. However we might need to face the reality that no one is banging on the door because they don't expect to find Jesus there.

So what are the obstacles that stop people seeing/hearing/perceiving Jesus when his people gather together? (Invite responses)

What obstacles might a church create/present to those trying to find/get to Jesus? (Invite responses)

Key points for consideration:

1. How can we identify and address the things in church life that

obscure or block people's path to Jesus? Do we need to park our egos, our history, our theology, our pride or our cherished traditions to clear the way?

2. How can we create sacred spaces where people know they are welcome and accepted and find the forgiveness and healing they seek?
3. How can we show people that Jesus, along with his church, is concerned about the issues facing the world, communities and individual lives? Where do we/can we challenge injustice? Where are we/ could we be smashing through the ceilings of inequality?

Creative Prayer

Give people sheets of paper on which to write their prayers for the world, for the local community, for the church thinking especially of the things considered in the service? Reflect on the torn curtain in the temple where the death of Jesus connects with God symbolically breaking free from the temple and being freely available to the whole world. Meditate on the prayers and invite God to break through in to those situations then invite everyone to rip their paper in two as a mark of faith, certain or uncertain, that God hears and cares and acts.

Music:

Pocketful of faith (Tim Hughes)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kskdGovofTM>

Hosanna (Hillsong) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hnMevXQutyE>

Liturgies and hymns Mark 2: 1-12

This is where you can find hymn suggestions and liturgies for use with this week's text.

HYMNS

RS 107 or MP 940 - The love of God comes close

The Christ was a vagabond

Tune: R&S 583 (Streets of Laredo or Bard of Armagh)

The Christ was a vagabond, penniless stranger,
or so some would style him, deriding his call.
And those who would follow, were they any nearer
the total self-giving, of giving their all?

And we at this moment, are we any better?
Our silver excuses, have we got it right?
The poor are still with us? Then love of our neighbour
is vacuous, meaningless, blinding our sight.

The wealth of this nation is at our disposal,
yet few hold the purse strings, have power to decide,
while others are crippled. Iniquitous 'sharing'
will leave them impoverished, nowhere to hide.

With wages and taxes we barter for people,
define what is poverty, pity the poor,
but then, when the homeless and helpless come knocking,
we bar them from pavements while locking the door.

We bathe in hypocrisy, claim to be righteous,
great God will you open our eyes to the plight

of those we have damaged, derided, diminished:
the Christ in the other, still hid from our sight.

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LITURGY

Call to worship

Though there are rulers, presidents, kings, queens,
God is the Lord of all life.

In God we live and move and have our being.

God requires our faithfulness and our service.

**We reach out to others with the same kind of love
with which God has touched our lives.**

Come, let us worship the Lord who is always with us.

Let us praise God who walks daily by our side. Amen.

Nancy C. Townley, posted on the [Ministry Matters](#) website. Visit that site for many other good lectionary-based worship resources.

Prayers:

Prayer of Lament

To the One who calls us Beloved,
We bring hurting hearts to you this morning,
Our fearfulness, and our worry.
Our anger.

Our world is not as it should be.

The ones with power make decisions for their own benefit

In a show of might,
they flirt with war and destruction
But the most desperate among us are left to fend for themselves.

The proud and the comfortable say,
“Everything is fine. There is no problem.”
But those without privilege know better.
They hunger, they weep, they bleed.
They wait for your justice to vindicate them – before it’s too late!

In a world where hate is a virtue and exclusion a way of life
It is hard to hold on to what unites
It is tough to find common ground
Our humanity is lost in the scuffle.

Those of us who wish for peace forget how to make it
Or where to begin
And fall into hopelessness, cynicism or despair
We too begin to feel powerless
in the face of widespread suffering and systemic evil

Even our planet seems ready to crack
under the pressure of forces that are beyond us

Earthquakes, hurricanes, wildfires, volcanoes
Nature groans – and with it, your people.

Come, Lord Jesus, we pray.

When will you come?
When will you make right?

We are not strong enough, not wise enough, not good enough
To make peace, to bring healing

But you are,

You are the one who planted peace in our hearts
You are the one who will make it come to pass.

Come, Lord Jesus.

Strengthen the bruised reed.
Make weapons into ploughshares.
Comfort the weary and heavy-laden.
Make a home for the homeless.
Still the waters.
Calm the storm.

Come, Lord Jesus, you and your kingdom,
Come.
On earth as it is in heaven.
Your will be done.
Amen.

Prayer of Confession

God of Grace,
we know that you have chosen us,
but we often forget that you have also chosen others.
You call us to be imitators of Christ,
yet many times we are imitators of the world.
You challenge us to turn from our idols,
but we are tempted to turn back to them again and again.

Rescue us, Lord, from ourselves.
Show us your way.
Guide our every action,

that we may live as you call us to live.

Lover of justice,
open our eyes to see you;
open our ears to hear you;
open our hearts to love you;
and open our hands to serve you.

~ written by Amy Loving, and posted on **The Worship Closet**. <http://worshipcloset.com/words-for-worship-18th-sunday-after-pentecost/>

Prayer for the Offering

As we offer our gifts and lives in this moment,
may we become imitators of you, Gracious God,
who holds nothing back from us,
but is generous and gracious with all that is yours.
In Jesus' name, we pray. Amen.

~ written by Thom Schuman, and posted on **Lectionary Liturgies**. <http://lectionaryliturgies.blogspot.ca/>