

The healing of forgiveness – Matthew 9:1-8

10:30am on 30th May 10

Introduction

Good morning everyone

Authority is an unpopular concept in our post-modern world.

Typically authority seems to be held by people who are able to run things the way they want and are answerable to no one

Typically authority seems to go together with ideas like repression and human rights abuses
And in some parts of the world, authority is wielded by people who knock on your door at five o'clock in the morning for no good reason, and who take you away to beat you up and maybe even kill you

Authority means power, which often means force and can mean violence
So it's no wonder that we're sometimes suspicious of the very word authority itself

Yet in the Gospels we read that Jesus also has authority

Authority in his teaching

Authority over diseases at a distance

Authority over a storm

Authority over evil

What is this authority?

Is it like the authority we know in our world?

Or is this something different?

Imagine there was a different kind of authority with a different kind of power

Imagine an authority with a power that doesn't need to have an army to back it up

A power that doesn't need thugs to break down doors in the early hours of the morning

A power that has nothing to do with violence

A power that gives freedom, rather than take it away

A power that heals, rather than destroys

A power that's driven by love, rather than hate

Well that's what's on offer from Jesus

The Gospels in one story after another tell us that this is exactly the sort of authority that Jesus has

This morning I'm going to look at Jesus' authority through the eyes of the four main players in our passage from Matthew 9 and I'm going to ask you to decide which player you're most like:

Is it the paralysed man who was healed?

Is it one of the faithful friends who brought him to Jesus?

Is it one of the teachers of the law who wanted to challenge Jesus?

Or are you most like the crowd who were watching from the side?

Got that? The paralysed man, his friends, the teachers of the law, the crowd – which one are you most like?

The friends (v 2)

Let's start by looking at the faithful friends.

I need you to picture the scene of this well-known and loved story

Jesus by this stage in his ministry had already developed quite a track record for his healing and teaching. And word had gone round that Jesus was back in his own town of Capernaum. So the place was packed. In Mark's version which is a bit longer we're told that *"So many gathered that there was no room left, not even outside the door"* (Mark 2:2)

In these circumstances getting close to Jesus would have been difficult enough, even for an able-bodied person. There'd have been no chance for someone who couldn't use his legs.

But the paralysed man had one of the most precious things in the whole world. He had good friends who believed in Jesus' ability to help their needy friend.

The paralysed man's meeting with Jesus wasn't by chance.

It happened because of the loving devotion of his close friends who weren't about to let slip the opportunity to bring him to Jesus

These faithful friends had complete faith in Jesus and his authority

In Mark's longer account of this story, we learn more about the character of these four friends.

They were so persistent and determined to reach Jesus

So confident that their friend would be healed if they reached him, that they dug a hole through the flat roof to achieve their purpose

These four men were prepared to pay a great price to bring their friend to Jesus!

They refused to allow his condition to stop them

They refused to allow the crowd to stop them

They refused to allow the ceiling to stop them

They refused to allow the critics to stop them

Do you also love your non-believing family, friends and neighbours enough to bring them to Jesus?

Are you also willing to be ridiculed for their sake – maybe even by them?

Do you spend time with them looking for chances, for opportunities, to bring them to Jesus?

Are you also willing to get on your hands and knees and tear away whatever it is that's holding them back from committing themselves to Christ?

So are you like these faithful friends?

Have you brought others to Jesus Christ yet?

What would it take for you to become like one of these faithful friends?

Here are three practical ideas to consider:

Firstly, pray persistently for your non-believing friends and family. J John the well-known evangelist challenges people to choose a group of 7 non-believers and commit to praying for them every day until they become Christians

Secondly, invite a non-believer to the next Alpha course and come along with them

Thirdly, if they're interested in football invite them to watch England's World Cup matches with you on the big screen in the Chapter House – I've even got some tickets here for you!

The paralysed man (vv 2, 6, 7)

So we've looked at the paralysed man's friends, now what about the man himself?

Let's go back to that scene in the crowded house as Jesus is teaching.

A glance at the paralysed man on his stretcher would have told Jesus all he needed to know and he immediately takes charge.

After gently reassuring him that it's going to be okay, Jesus forgives the paralysed man his sins.

Are you surprised by this?

Are you surprised that Jesus doesn't physically heal the man first?

Because if so you'd be in good company

The secular world we live in would think that priority crazy!

The secular world wouldn't be able to understand how physical healing is more important than the forgiveness of sins

Because the secular world has no idea about the seriousness of sin

The secular world doesn't see how sin cripples us and makes us powerless

The secular world doesn't see how sin changes us and makes us dependent on others

The secular world doesn't see how sin isolates us and keeps us from Jesus

The secular world doesn't see how unforgiven sin will eventually condemn us to death

This why the forgiveness of sins is far more important than physical healing

It's because sin has eternal consequences, whereas physical health does not

Let's never underestimate the seriousness of sin

Jesus certainly never does so neither should we!

Sin messes up our relationships with God and with other humans and it can paralyse us.

Now although some of us may be getting a bit slower these days, I don't think there's anyone in church today who's totally physically paralysed

But it's quite possible to be paralysed in other ways

When Fiona and I lived in Hull, the front and back doors of our home were very close together.

And I clearly remember our eldest son Simon going through a stage, at 2 or 3 years old, when he was unable to decide which of the two doors that he wanted to go through.

He would stand there literally unable to move.
He was effectively paralysed.
In the end I had to carry him into the house.

We can be paralysed by all sorts of non-physical things
We can be paralysed by indecision like Simon was
We can be paralysed by the storms in our lives
We can be paralysed by our fears and our worries
We can be paralysed by anxieties about our finances, our health, our work, our looks, and
about our relationships

All these things can cause us to retreat into our shell
To effectively become immobile

Are any of you feeling like that this morning?
Are any of you hurting so much that you feel trapped?
You feel as though you can't move?
Are you feeling like that paralysed man?

Then, like him, you need to go to Jesus
You need to go the source of authority in this world and put yourself under him
You need to receive the healing of forgiveness
It's only Jesus who'll have the answer to your needs – just as he did with the paralysed man

And when we do this
When we go to Jesus
We find he takes us by the hand, he reassures us with the gentle whisper of the Holy Spirit
in our ear, and he leads us to the only place of safety and healing there is – himself

In his love and care for this man, Jesus does first things first.
He deals with his main problem
He does what only he has the authority to do
He forgives the man his sins

Jesus uses the authority which God has invested in Him to bring new life.
And to prove his authority over sin to those who were watching, Jesus demonstrated his
authority over sickness.
He told the paralysed man to: "Get up, take your mat and go home" (v. 11).
And the man on the mat did just as exactly as Jesus commanded.

The teachers of the law (vv 3-6)

So we've looked at the paralysed man and his friends. Now what about the teachers of the
law?

Now to be honest I'm not really expecting anyone to put up their hands for this one! After
all these are the bad guys in the story!

I don't know whether you know but I'm passionate about Test cricket. And at home I sometimes follow it via text reports over the internet.

On Thursday there was a debate about cricket jumpers and a guy called John emailed in to say that he had had the same jumper from age 9 until the present day at 6ft 2in and weighing 18 stone. Miraculously it still fitted him. "I think it must have come from a magic sheep" he ended.

About 20 minutes later his wife emailed in. This is absolutely true by the way! "I'm the wife of John" she wrote "and can I just say that he THINKS the jumper still fits him. Magic sheep? More like a magic mirror...."

Let's just remember that it can be easy to fool ourselves
Maybe we really do have nothing in common with the teachers of the law
But are we sure?
Let's carry out a quick check-up on ourselves

Firstly, like the teachers of the law, can we be too quick to criticise something without quite understanding what's really happening?

Secondly, are we like them an inspector of religion?

What I mean is this: do we come to services as judges, as though we're watching 'Britain's got talent' or 'Over the rainbow'? Ready to give each service a mark out of 10

Thirdly, what brought us to church this morning – was it a sense of duty or a sense of joy?

Was it a need to satisfy a regular habit; or was it a desire to worship the living God?

Finally, did we come here to be under Jesus' authority?

Did we come here wanting to learn from him?

This week someone told me how they had been really challenged by Steve's sermon last Sunday. They'd come to the service praying that they would get closer to God – and surprise, surprise, that's exactly what happened!

I'd like us to examine our motivation for being here in church this morning.

Because you see the problem with the teachers of the law is that they came to Jesus with the wrong attitude

Their motivation was completely wrong

They came to judge Jesus, not to learn from him

And as a result they failed to see who he was and what was going on around them

They failed to see the Kingdom of Heaven being fulfilled, right in front of their very eyes

You know there's only one thing scarier than being a teacher of the law...

And that's being one without knowing it!

So, let's take active steps to make sure there's absolutely no danger of us being like these teachers of the law

Let's consciously put ourselves under Jesus' authority

Let's consciously put ourselves under the Bible's authority

And let's come to church each Sunday ready and longing to meet with our God and let's learn from him.

The crowd (v 8)

Okay, so we've looked everyone now except the crowd. To what extent might you be like the various members of the crowd in our story?

Let's go back to that house in Capernaum.

As amazed as the crowd must have been by sight of a man being lowered through a roof, they would have been even more amazed when they saw him walk out of the house with his mat under his arm.

In verse 9 it says that *"When the crowd saw this, they were filled with awe; and they praised God, who had given such authority to men."*

Do you praise God when you see what Jesus is doing in the world?

Are you thrilled when you see people being saved?

Were you inspired when you heard the four wonderful testimonies of those who were baptised last Sunday evening?

Something I experienced when Fiona and I were on our recent holiday in New Zealand, something I never ever expected to do in real life was bungy jumping.

The excitement, the drama, the tension as you go through your instructions, as you have your feet strapped into the harness is frankly incredible.

And then the moment when you actually jump... well to be honest I don't really know how that part felt...

Because you see, I didn't actually jump!

I just watched other people jumping...

There are many places to be in a crowd

You can be at the front or the back

Or you can be hedging your bets in the middle!

You can be observing from the edges or you can be getting involved in the centre

If you'd been in the crowd that day in Capernaum

Would you have understood Jesus' authority?

Would you have understood that something special was happening there?

Would you have got involved personally?

Are you a spectator or player in Christian things?

Are you just watching or are you getting stuck and involved?

There are lots of ways to be a player. To use a football analogy, you don't have to be a striker; there are lots of other positions on the field.

But let's be in no doubt about this, to be under Jesus' authority you have to be on the pitch somewhere. You can't be in the stands.

Conclusion

In our passage today, we've seen that Jesus has the authority to do what only God can do

He can forgive sins

He can change a person's life from the inside out

He can free them from whatever is gripping them so tightly that they can't even move

At the start I asked you to decide who in the story you're most like?

Are you most like the paralysed man? If so you can be un-paralysed today, if you're willing to accept Jesus' gentle and loving authority.

Are you most like the faithful friends? Do you understand and accept Jesus' authority and want your family and friends to experience this for themselves? If so, what are you going to bring them to: an Alpha course, a service, the football?

Are you most like a teacher of the law? Are you still wanting to challenge Jesus' authority because you haven't quite worked out yet who Jesus is? If so, don't rest until you do! Speak to Steve or me or David after the service

Or are you most like a member of the crowd?

And if so, are you watching from the side? If so, you need to put yourself under Jesus' authority and get yourself actively involved? Sign up to help at the new service, become part of the welcoming team, or join the driving rota

Which of the four players are you most like?

Of course in one sense it doesn't matter which we are because we're all sinners and Jesus is the only one with the authority to deal with our sin.

The truth is that whoever we are in the story we need Jesus anyway.

The real difference between everyone is simply whether we're aware of our need of him and his authority in our life or not.

Prayer