

Mark 2: 1-12 (19 Feb 2012)

07:30, 09:00, 19:00 Grahamstown Cathedral

I am sure many of you have heard the story of the two wicked Australian brothers. They were rich and used their money to keep their ways from the public eye. They even attended the same church but the whole community knew of their duplicity. All of a sudden, one of the brothers died. The remaining brother sought out the vicar the day before the funeral and handed him a check for the amount needed to repair the roof of the church. 'I have only one condition,' he said. 'At his funeral, you must say my brother was a saint.' This particular Vicar was a shrewd and practical man, and decided to accept the check and gave his word to the brother.

The next day, the whole village turned up at the funeral, expecting the deceased brother to be exposed as a crook, having no knowledge of the 'transaction' between the remaining brother and the vicar. The vicar did not hold back. 'He was an evil man,' the vicar said. 'He cheated on his wife and swindled many of you here today.' After going on in this vein for a small time, he concluded with, 'But, compared to his brother over there, he was a saint.'

C.S. Lewis asserted that ancient peoples approached God, or the gods, as the accused person approaches a judge. For modern peoples the roles are reversed. Humanity is the judge and God is in the dock. 'The trial may even end in God's acquittal. The important thing is that humans are on the bench and God is in the dock.' Lewis goes on to say that the preacher's first task is to convince the hearers of the unwelcome diagnosis of our sin before prescribing a remedy. The story of the Australian brothers is helpful in bringing us to this point of acknowledgement. Though there may be many people whom we think we are better than, compared to Christ or even a Mother Theresa we fall short.

The Gospel text for today insists that there can be a correlation between sin and disease, or sin and paralysis as we heard read today. It is helpful to note that the reverse is not always the case. In other words it is not always helpful to think that every illness we have is some kind of divine punishment for sin.

I think of the man who was born blind. When Jesus was questioned as to what sin had made the man blind, Jesus answer is that nobody sinned, but the man was born blind that the glory of God may be revealed.

Morna Hooker tells the story of a woman who was totally paralysed for two years. When questioned, it was discovered that she had succumbed to the paralysis immediately after witnessing on television a violent killing, which had by chance been broadcast as it took place. Reassurance that she was in no way responsible for the crime resulted in a cure as instantaneous and dramatic as the paralysis. While such cases are undoubtedly rarer than popular imagination supposes, the fact that they happen at all confirms the likelihood that a sense of guilt could cause paralysis, and that the assurance of forgiveness could bring about a cure.

Therefore, while paralysis is not a divine judgement, sin can be a form of paralysis, an inability to move. The experience of forgiveness on the other hand enables a person to rise up and return home with dignity. Sin is isolation and alienation, forgiveness is homecoming.

We encounter a rather scandalous God in the scriptures set for us today. The prophet Isaiah writes of a God who blots out the transgressions of the people and chooses to forget their sins. Mercy is shown to a people who do not deserve it and whom we know will squander that grace again and again... much like us I suppose. In the Jesus presented to us by Mark our moral perceptions are turned on their head. The paralytic makes no confession of sin, Jesus simply declares his sins forgiven the moment he appears. Salvation and penance have exchanged places. God's forgiveness seems so unconditional that it seems to come before repentance. In this way forgiveness becomes the condition for repentance.

After Jesus forgives of the paralytic there is the debate with the scribes, concluding with the physical healing of the paralytic. This form of healing is often referred to as a miracle. It may be helpful to spend a little time reflection on what we understand by the term miracle.

In casual usage, "miracle" is seen as any event that is statistically unlikely but beneficial, (such as surviving a natural disaster), or simply a "wonderful" occurrence, regardless of likelihood, such as a birth. Other miracles might be: survival of a terminal illness, escaping a life threatening situation or 'beating the odds'. Some coincidences may be perceived to be miracles.

Theologians have always maintained that miracles are simply the divine action of God. If this is the case, there may be many more miracles at work in and around than we care to take note of.

By way of a personal example, I remember praying for a miracle after my Mother underwent a stroke. The miracle I hoped and prayed for was her full recovery... the miracle we received as a family was far more profound. My mom has made an amazing recovery, however lives with constant dizziness and a numb right side among other things. I consider her positive attitude to life and the strength my father displays as her care giver to be miraculous. I consider my parents to be wonderful people, but their response to the situation in which they find themselves bears the mark of God's action in and through them... a miracle.

The miracle story of the healing of the paralytic is depicted in one of the walls of the Dura Europos house church unearthed by archaeologists. The Dura Europos house church was a significant find because it was destroyed in the middle of the 3rd century and so offers us a window into the faith of very early Christians. The fresco of the paralytic is found in the baptistery of that house church. Why did our Christian ancestors link this story of forgiveness and healing to baptism?

There may be several reasons... I think this story is a wonderful illustration of how God reaches out to us long before we realize that we need God. Many of us were baptised as infants. I remember a time in my life when I was angry about that because I wanted baptism to be my decision. That petty selfishness is long past and I now look back on my baptism as one of God's first actions of love to me. Of course baptism is 'not the rite of a moment but the principle of a lifetime.'

God's love and forgiveness which was made know to us in our baptism, our washing, should continue to be experienced and result in freedom, abundant living, healing and wholeness. However, if our faith never moves beyond intellectual conviction we may become spiritually paralysed. Jesus praised the litter bearers for their robust faith, which was literally boundary breaking activity! Paul reminded the Corinthians that they had received the God's first instalment of the Spirit. We too have been sealed by the Spirit, the gifts and the fruits of the Spirit are at our disposal. The question is have we tapped into the Spirit given at our baptism, have we nurtured and grown that 'first installment'?