

**SERMON – 17/9/23**  
**'Through the Roof'**

Luke 5:17-26

"When Jesus saw their faith, He said, 'Friend, your sins are forgiven.'" (Luke 5:20)

Today we are marking Disability Sunday, although I immediately want to say that, as we celebrate what God calls each one of us to be as part of the Body of Christ and to do in Christian service, our emphasis should be more on the *abilities* that each one of us has rather than on the *disabilities* that each one of us has. Every one of us at some point will have said 'if only I was more able, if only I had more experience, more confidence, more faith, if only I was younger (or older), if only I wasn't so busy, if only I wasn't so hesitant' so we *all* tend to feel that there are obstacles in the way of our serving God – believe me that is as true of someone in my position as it is for someone who is newly born into God's Kingdom. And perhaps we are tempted to think that the obstacles that stand in the way of the advance of the Kingdom even in our little community here never mind in the world at large are so insurmountable that it's not worth even trying to do our bit. Well, stand by, because as we reflect this morning on that familiar story that Graeme read for us earlier I want to challenge the assumption that there is nothing folk like us can do to accomplish the work of God in our challenging times. Even the fact that someone whose voice and whose ability to stand have been weakened by Motor Neurone Disease can come and read the Scriptures at a church service is a cause for celebration today).

We have been reminded of a story that will have been with some of us since we were children – the crowds swelling round Jesus, the staggering perseverance of the friends of the paralysed man, the almost ridiculous scene as the roof tiles are lifted off and the man is brought to the Lord from up above. But what has this passage to say to us this morning as we try to face up to the obstacles that stand in the way of the advance of the Kingdom of God? Well, as we reflect on these verses, I'd like to explore with you today something of the day-to-day practicalities of our

Christian calling and particularly what it means when Jesus says, 'Friend, your sins are forgiven.'

Let me suggest that one of our highest callings as Christians is to seek the very best from Jesus for others. There are three things, I think, that are worth highlighting.

First, it was *some* men who brought the paralysed man, and not just a single individual. Obviously there were some practical considerations to take into account in getting a paralysed man to the house where Jesus was in the days before wheelchairs, and it would probably have needed four strong men to carry the man who is described as lying on a mat. I guess it might have been possible for *one* person to get this person to Jesus but it is significant that *several* people were involved in bringing him, because in trying to bring people today to encounter the Lord it is almost always the case that more than one person is involved, working together under God. Each of us will have a different role to play in leading others to encounter Christ, if only we would recognise one another's gifts and abilities, if only we would allow personal pride to melt away, if only we would prove what the apostle Paul found to be true: 'I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God made it grow.' If we will allow God to mould us, we will all be used in different ways to reach different people - let's not consider each other as rivals but as fellow-workers and let us co-operate to bring our generation to the feet of Jesus.

The second thing to say is that those who brought the paralysed man had a struggle. We should note their determination and their ingenuity but we should also note the *self*-interest of the crowd who had gathered to hear Jesus preaching - they would not let an obviously needy man through to Him. Perhaps we who seek to follow Jesus today are sometimes a bit like that crowd - deeply concerned to hear Jesus' teaching and to know His blessing in our lives, but by our self-interest sometimes actually preventing others from getting in. Who was it that said that the Church exists for the benefit of those who are outside it? Should we not be quicker to follow the example of the men who brought their friend, determined whatever the effort involved, whatever it may cost us personally, to see another person touched by the Lord Jesus? Should we not be prepared to use all possible means,

(even to the extent of knocking a hole in the ceiling!) so that another person can experience the fullness of life that only Jesus can give? To what lengths are we prepared to go so that others can share the faith that people once shared with us?

The third thing to consider is the startling statement that it was when Jesus saw the faith of the men who had brought the paralytic (rather than the faith of the paralytic himself) that He forgave the man's sins. We are not told anything about the willingness or otherwise of the paralysed man to be brought to Jesus - he apparently doesn't open his mouth until he is overwhelmed by the forgiveness of his sins and is given back the power of his legs, when he goes home praising God. In any case, it was the faith of his *friends* that Jesus acts upon. And this is something that must give us encouragement as we pray for others and as we attempt to lead them to Christ. While we cannot believe *for* somebody else, we *can* by our faithful prayers call upon God to draw near to them and influence the circumstances that will lead them to believe. Are we concerned enough to pray that others may come to faith? And do we pray with real faith or is it a rather forlorn kind of hoping against hope that we try to pass for prayer? Remembering the miracle that Jesus wrought in response to the faith of the four in our passage this morning, let's get down on our knees in dedicated prayer for those around us.

Those men who brought their friend acted together, they acted with determination and ingenuity, and they acted in faith. Let us do likewise in what we do in Jesus' name.

But I don't want to finish without saying something about what is perhaps the most puzzling thing in our reading today, the fact that Jesus' immediate response to the paralysed man is to say: 'Friend, your sins are forgiven'. We probably all need to be challenged by what Jesus does here.

The friends were probably disappointed that He didn't start by giving the man the ability to walk as they had doubtless hoped. How many of us would also rate physical healing as something more important than being reconciled to God? But we need to recognise that God sees with different eyes than ours - we look at the outward appearance but God looks at the heart, and although

everyone who saw that man saw crippled limbs, Jesus saw the fact that there was something even more disabling than paralysis holding this man back from living as God intended him to, something which had to be dealt with before it was worth putting anything else right. I know some people who are broken in their bodies but who are serenely happy in spirit because of the joy they have found in being 'ransomed, healed, restored, forgiven' by the King of Heaven, as we sang earlier. Equally, I know folk whose lives appear to be practically perfect but who, deep down, know that there is something vital missing in their lives. What is *your* most basic need, I wonder? What is it that most disables you? What does your friend need first - your neighbour, the person for whose blessing you long most? God knows. When we bring ourselves and others to Jesus, let's not prejudge what work He will do - He perceives the deepest needs.

When Jesus causes the man to walk as a sign to the Pharisees that He was in fact also powerful enough to forgive sins, we are challenged to believe that what may seem impossible to us is possible for God both in the physical and in the spiritual realm, because both go hand in hand. The forgiveness of sins lies at the very heart of what we believe and how we should live as Christians. In the proclamation of the Gospel let it be shouted from the rooftops that in Christ there is the opportunity for a new beginning in life no matter what may have gone before and no matter what else is going on in us. In the life of God's people may that be reflected in our attitudes and in our actions, for we cannot receive God's forgiveness if we are unwilling to forgive others, but when that kind of revolution takes place in a person's life it unleashes the possibility of incredible transformation.

For the paralysed man, forgiveness came with the ability to walk; for another person it may come with a liberating joy that actually transcends physical disability or difficult circumstances; for someone else it will come with a change of mindset or a change of direction in life. God's forgiveness changes people in all kinds of outward and inner ways. Don't let your finite mind limit God's possibilities in any way either in yourself or in others around you. Ask great things of Him, and expect great things of Him, for

yourself, in this fellowship, amongst those for whom you pray and those in whom God is at work in these days.

"When Jesus saw their faith, He said, 'Friend, your sins are forgiven.'" What does Christ say when He sees *our* faith, I wonder? What is faith prompting us to do in His service this week? He holds out the offer of forgiveness still in the world, and through it so much more. Let us not be obstacles to His transforming work, but let us all be channels of His liberating peace.