

Trinity Baptist Church
Sunday 15th November 2020
Mark 1:40 – 2:17 Jesus' Forgiveness Of Sin

As this would have been a family service, Debs has prepared some extra material, which will involve families talking together. So, if you wish to mute me and follow that material instead, feel free. Otherwise, we continue our series in Mark, asking ourselves the question Jesus asked his disciples, "Who do you say I am?" And what difference does who he is make to your life? It's a longer passage today, from Mark 1:40 right through to 2:17.

[Read Mark 1:40 – 2:17]

1:40A man with leprosy came to him and begged him on his knees, 'If you are willing, you can make me clean.'

41Jesus was filled with compassion. He reached out his hand and touched the man. 'I am willing,' he said. 'Be clean!' 42Immediately the leprosy left him and he was cleansed.

43Jesus sent him away at once with a strong warning: 44'See that you don't tell this to anyone. But go, show yourself to the priest and offer the sacrifices that Moses commanded for your cleansing, as a testimony to them.' 45Instead he went out and began to talk freely, spreading the news. As a result, Jesus could no longer enter a town openly but stayed outside in lonely places. Yet the people still came to him from everywhere.

2:1A few days later, when Jesus again entered Capernaum, the people heard that he had come home. 2They gathered in such large numbers that there was no room left, not even outside the door, and he preached the word to them. 3Some men came, bringing to him a paralysed man, carried by four of them. 4Since they could not get him to Jesus because of the crowd, they made an opening in the roof above Jesus by digging through it and then lowered the mat the man was lying on. 5When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralysed man, 'Son, your sins are forgiven.'

6Now some teachers of the law were sitting there, thinking to themselves, 7'Why does this fellow talk like that? He's blaspheming! Who can forgive sins but God alone?'

8Immediately Jesus knew in his spirit that this was what they were thinking in their hearts, and he said to them, 'Why are you thinking these things? 9Which is easier: to say to this paralysed man, "Your sins are forgiven," or to say, "Get up, take your mat and walk"? 10But I want you to know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins.' So he said to the man, 11'I tell you, get up, take your mat and go home.' 12He got up, took his mat and walked out in full view of them all. This amazed everyone and they praised God, saying, 'We have never seen anything like this!'

13Once again Jesus went out beside the lake. A large crowd came to him, and he began to teach them. 14As he walked along, he saw Levi son of Alphaeus sitting at the tax collector's booth. 'Follow me,' Jesus told him, and Levi got up and followed him.

15While Jesus was having dinner at Levi's house, many tax collectors and sinners were eating with him and his disciples, for there were many who followed him. 16When the teachers of the law who were Pharisees saw him eating with the sinners and tax collectors, they asked his disciples: 'Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?'

17On hearing this, Jesus said to them, 'It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but those who are ill. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners.'

[Pray]

At my university church in Canterbury, there was a Northern Irish ex-policeman, who occasionally preached – whose name I can't actually remember. But one of his stories has always stuck in my mind. He told us of how he was walking down the street one day – possibly on his beat – and saw a beggar, sitting on a mat, leaning his back against a wall. He had a blanket over him, but there were no legs under the blanket. And he loudly rebuked those who passed him by without giving him any money, quoting Scripture at them to shame them for their lack of compassion towards a crippled man. The policeman approached, and said to him, "You've been quoting Scripture, so I'm going to quote some Scripture to you. 'Get up, take your mat, and go home!'" "And," he said to us, "that's what he did!" He paused and an audible gasp went round the room. Then he burst our bubble: "It wasn't a miracle," he told us. "The man was a fraud. He was so double-jointed he could hide his legs behind him, and would sit there pretending to be crippled to con passers-by." Sin comes in many guises!

Now, sin is a word we Christians use a lot. Sin, we say, causes a barrier between God and humanity; so great a barrier that God had to send his Son, Jesus, to die in our place, so that he could take away our sin, and we could be forgiven and restored to relationship with God. That's the gospel – the good news – of Jesus. But what do we actually mean by *sin*? Have a think for a moment. What is sin?

[Pause to give time to think]

Sin is far more than just doing wrong things. Those things are sins, but sin itself is a state of being – an attitude of the heart. And the Bible gives us several definitions or pictures to help us understand it, and what Jesus has done to overcome it. Indeed, there are three contained in this passage. The first is the picture of uncleanness that we find in the story of the man with leprosy – or whatever had caused his skin to become damaged. Damaged skin made him ritually unclean, and I get the impression he had suffered this for a long time.

The problem was that the Law of Moses stated that a person with an unclean skin disease must remain *separate* from everyone else (those who were clean) until he or she was healed and ritually cleansed. This distinction was meant to remind the Israelites of the utter holiness (or separateness and purity) of God. There was a hierarchy of things. At the top was God who is holy, holy, holy ... (In Hebrew if you want to emphasise a description, you repeat it – so to say something is very holy, you would say it is "holy, holy." But God, is so holy that a three-fold repetition is required to describe him; he is holy, holy, holy – holy beyond the holiest thing imaginable.) ... So, God's at the top. Then, the room in the Temple where he chose to dwell was "holy, holy" (or the "most holy" place). The rest of the Temple, those who served in it, and the things used in its service were "holy". Then there were ritually clean things, including people, which could enter the Temple. Lastly, there were unclean things, which must not under any circumstances come into contact with anything holy – or ideally with anything clean!

For, the status of one thing could affect the status of another. For instance, when Isaiah's lips were touched by the holy coal from the holy altar fire, he was made holy. In contrast, when an unclean person touched a clean person or a clean thing, that person or thing was rendered temporarily unclean, and therefore excluded from any contact with the Holy Temple until their uncleanness had passed, and they had offered sacrifices to be made clean again.

So, that's why the uncleanness of something like leprosy came to be associated with sin and a presumed judgement from God. And that is why those who were unclean were shunned by those who did not want to be made unclean. Uncleanness was not the same as sinfulness, but the two came to be viewed as almost synonymous. And that is why it was such a big deal to this man with leprosy to be made clean: "If you are willing, you can make me clean."

Actually, there is a remarkable expression of faith in that statement. For, only holy sacrifices could make an unclean man truly clean. Yet this man recognised such holiness in Jesus that instinctively he knew that Jesus could not only cure his leprosy, but also make him clean – make him fit to enter God's presence and worship him! The only thing he isn't certain about is Jesus' *willingness* to bother with someone like him. But Jesus is filled with compassion and more than willing to make him clean – though, in this instance, he instructs him to follow the Jewish rituals, as a witness to the priests. So, Jesus makes the unclean clean – fit to enter God's presence in worship.

The second picture is the one seen in the story of the paralysed man, and summarised in Jesus' explanation for why he ate with tax collectors and sinners: "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but those who are ill. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners." (2:17). Sin is here pictured as sickness or incapacity – something that has infected us, and that needs to be cured. Of course, we have a different understanding of disability today, but then, both sickness and disability were closely identified with sinfulness. And the fact that Jesus here pronounces forgiveness for the man's sin before healing him physically might suggest that in *this* instance there *was* in fact a direct link between his sin and his paralysis – in contrast to Jesus' pronouncements about some other people. Or it may simply be that Jesus is highlighting that ultimately there is sickness in the world as a universal judgement on the sin of humanity.

Either way, Jesus makes an astounding claim. Not only can he heal from physical sickness and even paralysis; he can heal the sickness of sin! He has the authority on earth to forgive sin. The teachers of the Law are incensed! How dare he, a mere man, claim for himself authority that is God's alone to wield! And it is important that Jesus doesn't correct their understanding of what he claimed, or the theological assumption that lay behind their outrage. He doesn't say, "You've misunderstood me; what I meant was God will forgive your sin – I am merely the agent through which he will do that." No, Jesus was indeed personally claiming the authority on earth to forgive sins. What he challenged was their belief that he had not right to claim this authority. He has every right to claim the authority to forgive sins precisely because he is God. And he proves that authority by healing not only this man's sickness of sin, but also his sickness of paralysis. "Get up, take your mat and go home."

That claim is then reinforced when Jesus' calls into his discipleship school Levi, a tax collector, one whom the teachers of the Law regarded as the worst of sinners. Just associating with these filthy sinners made him essentially as guilty as them, for eating with them as good as condoned their behaviour. But Jesus had a purpose in doing this. These people, like all people, had a terrible disease that had infected their minds and bodies. A disease called sin! Jesus, the doctor, had come to heal them from that disease!

So, sin is uncleanness that bars us from God's intimate presence, but Jesus makes us clean and holy. Sin is a disease that destroys our lives, but Jesus makes us well and whole again. And there is one other illustration of sin in this passage: that of wilful disobedience to the word of God. What did Jesus order the

man whom he'd cleansed from leprosy not to do? Speak to anyone about what had happened. Instead he was to show himself to the priest and perform the rituals necessary to be declared fully clean. And Jesus' warning was very strong. But what did the man do? He blatantly disobeyed Jesus' instructions and went and told everyone what happened, anyway.

But, isn't it *good* to bring glory to Jesus by sharing how great he is? Normally yes, but it is even better to obey him. This man's disobedience had consequences. Jesus could no longer enter a town publicly – presumably because he would be swamped by demands on him, perhaps even by a desire to make him king by force against God's plan for his life and ministry. One man's seemingly harmless disobedience even hindered *Jesus* in his ministry!

We should hear a sober warning here of the damage to God's work that wilful disobedience can do, whether to our ministry or to others'. Yes, God can find ways round such problems – as he did here by bringing people out to Jesus. But the fact remains that the wilful disobedience among God's people, among those who have known his grace and forgiveness and yet refuse to obey his commands, wilful disobedience is the single greatest weapon working against the spread of God's Kingdom today. People look at the lives of those who claim to have been changed by Jesus, they see the hypocrisy of their actions when they don't match their words, and they conclude that the gospel of Jesus Christ is an insignificant fable, or worse, a cover-up for evil. What a tragedy when the behaviour of Christ's people puts people off from following Christ!

But there remains an antidote, even to wilful disobedience. The response that Jesus called for at the start of this gospel: repent. Turn away from sin and towards obedience to Christ's commands. The sickness of sin is healed at the cross, the uncleanness of sin is washed clean by Christ's blood, and the wilful, disobedient heart can be softened to submit. God hasn't finished with us yet, but we need to be willing to change. We need not merely to hear these words and so deceive ourselves; we need to examine ourselves and ask, "what in *my* actions or attitudes puts people off from following Christ"? Then repent, turn from those things, if possible put right what we have made wrong, and believe the good news of his forgiveness and restoration. Amen?

[Pray]