

Sunday 8 March Sermon 'Do everything we can to get close to Jesus.'

Mark 2:1-12

In this story of Jesus healing a paralyzed man, we see a wonderful example of the lengths some people would go to get close to Jesus. We also see another example of how the people flocked to hear Jesus. This took place very early in his ministry and yet here they are packing into the house where Jesus was staying, to the point that they were overflowing into the street. His popularity was just beginning.

It is interesting that the first thing Jesus says to the paralyzed man is, 'My son, your sins are forgiven.' It is interesting for two reasons. Firstly, to the Jewish people of the time, suffering and sin went hand in hand. They believed that anyone who suffers, does so because of their sin. To a certain extent we would agree. We have talked about the consequence of sin – there is always a consequence. However, that is quite different to believing that all suffering is a consequence of sin. We know, or perhaps I should say, we believe that many people suffer through no fault of their own.

However, it is also interesting because Jesus is acknowledging that sin is inevitable; we are all prone to sin. It is just part of being human. Last week we made the point that temptation is something none of us are immune from. And giving into temptation is something none of us are immune from.

There is the story of a very overweight man who decided it was time to shed a few kilos. He went on a diet and took it seriously. He even changed his usual driving route on the way to the office in order to avoid passing his favourite bakery.

One morning, however, he arrived at the office carrying a large sugar-coated bun. He was roundly chided by his colleagues, but he only smiled, shrugged his shoulders and said, 'What could I do? This is a very special bun. What happened is that, by force of habit, I drove past the bakery this morning and there in the window were trays full of the most scrumptious goodies. Well, I felt it was no accident that I happened to pass this way, so I prayed, "Lord, if you really want me to have one of these delicious goodies, let me find a parking space right in front of the bakery." And sure enough, on the tenth time around the block, there it was!'

The point I want to focus on from this story is both the determination and the faith of the friends of the paralyzed man to get to Jesus. There was no way through the door so what do they do? They go up on to the roof, tear a hole in the roof and lower him down so that he ends up virtually at Jesus's feet. Now that's determination.

It would have been reasonably easy to get up on to the roof. The roof was a place where people often sat, sunning themselves as they took a little time out for peace and quiet. To access the roof most houses had a steps on the outside of the house leading up to the roof.

But then they had to dig through the roof – not impossible by any means but certainly exhibits a resoluteness to get their friend next to Jesus. A point to consider – surely it was their belief that Jesus could heal their friend that gave them the determination to do what they did. It is, I believe, one of the great examples or stories of faith we read about in the New Testament.

The question I want to lay before us all this morning is this – Do we have the same determination to get close to Jesus? It is a question that is very appropriate to consider in this time of Lent. We should be examining our faith throughout the whole year but, as we have said before, Lent is a time when we should really be focusing on this issue. This is something we can focus on as we come together in worship on a Sunday, but it really needs to be something to be addressed throughout the week.

How do we do this? There are a few steps we need to take. Firstly, read. Of course, the Bible is an obvious book we should pick up and delve into, but there are other options as well. There are just so many books written about faith itself, people of faith, prayer, not to mention Jesus himself. One author I would recommend to you is Philip Yancey. He writes from the perspective of someone who travelled the journey of spiritual discovery. He writes in a manner that I think is easy to relate to and digest.

The second step we need to take is prayer. The third step we need to take is prayer. The fourth step we need to take is prayer. There a few more steps we need to take and they are all the same! I cannot emphasise enough how important prayer is if we want to draw closer to God. Prayer is the foremost way we communicate with God. This raises a very important aspect of prayer. Communication is two-way. You simply cannot have one-way communication. There is no such thing. So what does that mean?

It simply means we need to spend time listening to God as much as we do talking to God. We discussed this on Thursday evening at our Lent group gathering. One of my favourite verses in the Bible is Psalm 46:10, *'Be still and know that I am God.'* It means to literally be still, open yourself to God and let his presence wash over you. It can be the most fulfilling way to pray. Let God into your heart.

Heinrich Arnold, a well-known German Christian leader from last century, said this, *'Christian discipleship is not a question of our own doing, it is a matter of making room for God so that he can live in us.'* I would qualify this just a little by saying that I believe God is already there, it is just a case of making contact with him. I guess that's what he means when he says 'he can live in us.'

There is a legend that tells how, at the beginning of time, God resolved to hide himself within his own creation. As God was wondering how best to do this, the angels gathered round him.

'I want to hide myself in my creation,' he told them. 'I need to find a place that is not too easily discovered, for it is in their search for me that my creatures will grow in spirit and in understanding.'

'Why don't you hide yourself deep in their earth?' the first angel suggested. God pondered for a while and then replied, 'No. It will not be long before they learn how to mine the earth and discover all the treasures that it contains. They will discover me too quickly, and they will not have had enough time to do their growing.'

'Why don't you hide yourself on their moon?' a second angel suggested. God thought about this idea for a while, and then replied, 'No. It will take a little longer, but before too long they will learn how to fly through space. They will arrive on the moon and explore its secrets, and they will discover me too soon, before they have had time to do their growing.'

The angels were at a loss to know what hiding place to suggest. There was a long silence. 'I know,' piped up one angel finally, 'Why don't you hide yourself within their own hearts? They will never think of looking there.'

'That's it,' said God, delighted to have found the perfect hiding place. And so it is that God hides secretly deep within the heart of every one of his creatures, until that creature has grown enough in spirit and in understanding to risk the great journey into the secret core of its own being. And there the creature discovers its creator.

This journey calls for commitment and determination to complete. It is a commitment embodied in the friends of the paralyzed man, and it is a commitment we should be tackling during this Lenten period.

A final word on prayer from Abraham Joshua Heschel, Polish-born American rabbi and one of the leading Jewish theologians of the 20th century said, *'Prayer is like exercise. I know it's good for me and I benefit from it. Yet, as with exercise, I wish I did it more often. I know I would profit more.'*

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