

After Jesus' baptism, which we read a couple of weeks ago, the first two chapters of Mark's Gospel introduce us to Jesus as a remarkable healer. Last week, Jan talked about Jesus healing a man who had a demon. Between that and today's reading; Jesus cured Peter's mother who had a fever and healed a man's leprosy. Mark mentions by the way that Jesus cured many diseases and cast out many demons. Today, we read that Jesus restored a paralysed man. Maybe the paralysed man had a congenital condition, or maybe it was the result of an accident.

All the conditions that Jesus cured would have excluded a person from Jewish society by making them ritually unclean. Even if they were physically able to work (which a paralysed man could not) they would be barred from doing so because of their uncleanness. They would therefore be very poor as well as disabled. So all these healing miracles have two aspects – removing the physical disability, and restoring the person to society. Without each type of rehabilitation to wholeness, the other would have been meaningless. However, the precondition for all the miracles attributed to Jesus was the faith of the person being healed – or in this case, the paralysed man's friends – that healing was possible.

Today's healing story has an entertaining side. Jesus was preaching at his family home. It was so packed with his admirers that the friends of the paralysed man couldn't get in. So they resorted to removing part of the roof in order to let the man down into the house. Houses in villages like Capernaum usually had a flat roof that was used for sleeping, and which was reached by an outside stairway. It would have been made of rushes and mud-plaster, supported by wood beams. So the friends would have had to dig through the plaster-work to uncover the beams and then pull them up.

Whenever I read this story, I have to wonder what the rest of Jesus' family thought about this, and whether the paralysed man and his friends repaired the roof afterwards. Also, it must have been quite a show for the people inside the house to have bits of plaster and rushes rain down on them while Jesus was speaking to them.

An important detail in the way the story unfolds is that when Jesus saw the paralysed man, his first reaction was to say, "Son, your sins are forgiven." This angered some scribes who were present. They said that Jesus had blasphemed by what he said, because only God can forgive sins. That is still part of Christian theology. When I give the Absolution, it is not I who forgives sins. I simply pronounce that God is able to forgive them. When Jesus responded, "Which is easier – to tell this man that his sins are forgiven, or to tell him to pick up his mat and walk?" he was making a clear announcement about his identity – the Son of Man. We have to remember that the Son of Man is an expression that comes from the Book of Daniel Chapter 7, where the Son of Man comes down on the clouds of heaven. The Son of Man is thus more divine than a (or the) son of God. Jesus continued, "So that you should know that the Son of Man has the power to forgive, I now say to the paralysed man, "Get up and walk." Only then did the healing miracle occur. And 'only then' means, 'only when his sins have been forgiven' – the ancient world's view that misfortunes such as paralysis and illness are divine punishments for sin. Of course, that is no part of modern-day theology – at least,

not in Anglican doctrine.

Although Mark presents Jesus as a remarkable faith healer, we tend to define faith healing differently today. Faith healing is usually thought of as the practice of prayers and gestures such as laying on of hands that are claimed to elicit divine intervention in spiritual and physical healing. But unlike Jesus, modern faith healers do not claim divine status, at least to my knowledge. Rather, they call upon God to intervene in the human domain. Modern writing is mostly sceptical about the reality of faith healing. I can't comment, since I have no first-hand experience of it. But even sceptics admit that a person's positive attitude can have a significant effect on the outcome of their condition.

Ultimately, we realize that today's story is an important part of what Jesus' ministry was all about. Without abandoning Judaism, Jesus challenged the people – especially the leaders – of his time with new ideas. His healing activities up to this point have made him famous. His house is packed with people wanting to see and hear him. But instead of just healing the paralysed man, he starts by saying, “Your sins are forgiven.” This challenged the scribes, who saw it as blasphemous. But in the context of our modern sensibilities, Jesus broke the link between physical misfortune as a divine punishment for sin. That idea is expressed even more clearly in John's Gospel where a blind man is brought to Jesus. His disciples ask, “Who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” Jesus replied, “Neither this man nor his parents sinned.”

The various challenges with which Jesus' behaviour confronted the religious authorities remind us that if Jesus were here in our own society, he would challenge us in the same way – except that the issues would be different. Last week, in the hymn *Once to every man and nation*, we sang the lines, ‘New occasions teach new duties; time makes ancient good uncouth. They must upward still and onward who would keep abreast of truth.’ Many Christians today are like the Jewish authorities of Jesus' day. They look to tradition, and say “This is the way moral or right behaviour has always been, so it must be right.” Jesus challenged the link between sin and misfortune; elsewhere, he challenged the strictness of the Sabbath laws.

I cannot be sure what Jesus might have said in our time about issues like same sex marriage or medically assisted death, but those who have fought for these activities to become legal have certainly argued that ‘time has made ancient good uncouth.’ To me, a large part of the message of Jesus is that he challenged the status quo whenever it seemed to be unfair or discriminatory. Over and over again in the Gospels, Jesus made room in the Jewish society of his day for the ritually excluded, and for foreigners such as Samaritans. So it is reasonable to ask for whom Jesus might stand up in today's Canada – immigrants, refugees, First Nations people spring to mind.

What I am trying to say is this. Our Gospel stories about Jesus are not just accounts of an amazing faith healer who challenged the mores of his Jewish society, and who claimed divine status for himself. They are also parables for our own times – timeless stories that challenge us 21st century Canadians just as surely as they challenged the scribes and the Pharisees of Jewish society two thousand years ago. Like them, we have to decide when or whether time has made ancient good uncouth concerning contemporary ethical issues, and if so, how we are called to respond.