

‘BELIEVING & RECEIVING’ MATTHEW 8:1-13

[St Mark’s Northbridge, Online Services, Sunday July 25, 2021]

1. After the Mountaintop . . .

Every preacher will tell you that they’d love to preach a truly great sermon- even just once in a lifetime! I mean a truly great sermon- the kind of sermon that everyone who heard would remember, the kind of sermon that would be read by future generations, the kind of sermon that would have a profoundly transforming effect upon many people. Let’s be honest, there have really only been a few men, under God, who’ve done such a thing. And one of them is Jesus. I think we could safely say he did it on many occasions. But probably his most famous is the Sermon on the Mount. And you can read that sermon in Matthew 5-7. And here at St Mark’s we spent a couple of months earlier in the year going through it, and reminding ourselves of why it’s stood the test of time. We could even testify, could we not, that here again in 2021, Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount had a transforming effect on us!

But, of course, if you’ve preached a sermon that memorable, where do you go next? How do you follow that? If you were reading Matthew’s gospel for the first time you might get to the end of Chapter 7 and wonder whether there’s anything left to say after that? But, of course there is. It turns out that Jesus has other significant words to speak. And it also turns out that Jesus is so much more than a divinely-inspired preacher. And that’s why the gospel continues into Matthew 8 and Matthew 9 and beyond. And so, here at St Mark’s this term we’re going to work our way slowly through the next two chapters of the gospel. And we’re going to see and hear what Jesus did after he came down from the mountaintop. We’re going to experience, as readers, what the people of Jesus’ day experienced when they came down the mountain too. Along with them, we’re going to experience what happens when people meet Jesus, how he changes the lives of all those he comes into contact with.

And we start today/tonight with Matthew 8:1-13. Let me read it for us.

[Read Matthew 8:1-13]

2. Ten Things That Strike Me (& The Questions That Follow).

What I want to do this morning/evening, is briefly share with you ten things that strike me about these verses. And with each of these ten observations there will be a question or two that flows out of it. The first of these observations is about the crowd that follows Jesus, the next three are about the individuals who come to Jesus with faith, the next four are about Jesus himself, and then the last two are about the kingdom of heaven.

i) the crowds: great anticipation

So, Number 1- about the crowds. Verse 1 tells us that when Jesus came down the mountainside, large crowds followed him. And after the sermon he preached, it's no wonder. Crowds tend to follow famous people wherever they go. I imagine the scene here a bit like what happens when a Tiger Woods or a Phil Mickelson walk down the 18th fairway in the final round of a major golf championship. As they come down that last fairway of the day, swarms of golf fans emerge from within the trees on either side and rush in behind them as officials try to keep them from getting too close to the players. And coming down the mountainside after his famous sermon, Jesus was this kind of celebrity. And the crowds are filled with great anticipation. But what do they want from Jesus? Of course, none of them want to miss Jesus' next move. But not all of them will be disciples. Not all of them will take Jesus seriously. Because you can be part of Jesus' crowd without being one of his followers.

And that observation leads me to this question. What do you want from Jesus? There are many people even today who are interested in Jesus, or who even have a high regard for Jesus, but who aren't followers. Are you just curious about Jesus? Or do you want to be his disciple?

ii) those who come with faith: knowing their need

Number 2. Those who come to Jesus in these verses clearly know their need. The leper in verses 2-4 has an obvious need. He's got a life-destroying disease. And, in his day, he was also one of society's untouchables. He would likely have lived alone and away from normal civilization. As far as his Jewish neighbours were concerned, this man was unclean¹. His life was hopeless and he was powerless to change it. And he knew it. And I guess, in his case, that's not surprising at all.

But what's more surprising is that even a centurion needed Jesus help. Centurions were men of great power and authority. They were leaders of other men. Military nobility. But even this centurion comes to Jesus, verse 5, asking for help. Because this is where all true faith begins. With the acknowledgement of need.

Which leads me to ask: Do you acknowledge your need? Can you see and say much you need Jesus? We are all needy people, in many ways. We certainly all need spiritual healing. And until we can come to Jesus admitting that need, we won't receive what he offers.

iii) those who come with faith: knowing who Jesus is

Number 3. Those who come to Jesus in these verses seem to not only know themselves well, but they also know Jesus. They seem to know that he's much more than a

¹ See Leviticus 13:46.

celebrity. Did you notice that the leper in verse 2 comes to Jesus and kneels² before him? And did you notice that the centurion in verse 8 says that he doesn't even deserve to have Jesus come under his roof? And did you notice that both men refer to Jesus as Lord? Back in Matthew 1, we read that Jesus came into the world as Immanuel- God with us³. These two men here in chapter 8 seem to have some sense that that's exactly who Jesus is.

What about you? Do you know who Jesus really is? And do you treat him as he deserves to be treated? Can you call him Lord and mean it? Is he someone you're willing to kneel before, willing to worship?

iv) those who come with faith: knowing what Jesus can do

Number 4. Those who come to Jesus here seem to not only know who Jesus is, but also what he can do. The centurion even says that he knows Jesus could heal his servant just by uttering a word. But it's the words of the leper in verse 2 that most strike me here. He simply says, "Lord, if you are willing, you can make me clean." Whether Jesus can heal him is not in question. He knows he can. The only question is whether he's willing. And everyone who knows Jesus will share this same assumption. One ancient writer expresses it like this: 'My faith can sleep sound on no other pillow than Christ's omnipotence'.⁴

And so let me ask you. When you pray to Jesus for help, do you pray knowing without a doubt that Jesus can, and that the only question is whether he's willing? Do you simply assume that Jesus is capable of doing anything for you that you could possibly ask?

v) Jesus: touching the untouchable

Number 5. And here we turn to the things that strike me about Jesus himself. And the first thing here is what Jesus does in verse 3. He reaches out his hand to the leper and touches him. It's a moment of incredible compassion, and beauty. Some of us are old enough to remember footage of Princess Diana back in the 80's touching AIDS patients at a time when many were afraid to do so⁵. Even in our historical moment we hear stories of doctors and nurses getting up close as they sacrificially care for COVID patients. And here with Jesus we see something like that, but something that's also so much more than that. Because here is someone not only full of tender compassion, but who actually doesn't fear being contaminated by uncleanness. And he doesn't fear it because he possesses in himself an even more contagious purity. Here is a man who not only touches because he cares but because he is able to cure. How amazing is it that the only one willing to touch this leper is also the only one able to heal him?

² The word for 'knelt' here is the same Greek word which is used for 'worship'.

³ 1:23

⁴ Anonymous- quoted in J C Ryle, *Matthew*, p.57.

⁵ I owe this illustration to Michael Green in *The Message of Matthew*, p.114.

And so I ask, do you know this tenderness in Jesus? The kind of tenderness that invites us to come to him no matter how scared or broken or unclean we might be? Do you know the Jesus who touches the untouchable?

vi) Jesus: fulfilling ancient hopes

Number 6. Jesus- fulfilling ancient hopes. In verse 4 Jesus sends the healed leper to the temple to show the priests his clean skin, as prescribed by the Old Testament law⁶. But this was no mere obedience. Jesus wanted him to go as a 'testimony' to the priests. A testimony of what? Well, don't you think that when the man went and told them he'd been healed that the priests might have cause to wonder if Jesus was the one the Old Testament said would come? The Messiah? God's king?

So my question for us is this. Do we recognise Christ as the one who the whole old covenant looked forward to? Do we understand him as the one who's at the centre of God's plans? Do we read the Old Testament looking for him in its pages?

vii) Jesus: his authority

Number 7. His authority. Because I'm also struck by how the centurion recognises this in Jesus in verse 9. The centurion sees in Jesus a man whose authority outstripped his own. He saw that Jesus had power to combat sickness and death because, somehow, he had authority over them.

And so, I wonder. Do you believe that there is no authority like his? When you want something to change in your life, or in the world, are you looking to a government to fix things, or to scientists to find the answer, or to church leaders to tell you the way? Or do you look to the one who has an authority like no other?

viii) Jesus: his effortless power

Number 8. His effortless power. Because what also strikes me here, and I hope it strikes you, is how easily Jesus performs these miracles. Verse 3. Jesus touches the leper and says "be clean". And immediately the man's disease is gone. Immediately. And verse 13. Jesus says to the centurion "let it be done". And at that very moment his servant was healed. The words with which our passage ends underline the ease with which Jesus does the incredible. At that moment.

So I ask. Do you see how different Jesus is to us? Do you see how different Jesus is to even the most powerful people in the world today? Do you trust that there's nothing he can't do? With just a word? Effortlessly?

ix) the kingdom: for Gentiles

⁶ See Leviticus 14.

And then finally, two observations about God's kingdom. Number 9 is that God's kingdom is for Gentiles. Like that centurion. This is something we probably take for granted. But there was a time when most people in the world found this idea almost impossible to believe. And in Jesus' day what he said to the Gentile centurion in verses 10-11 would have shocked his hearers. Jesus said that his faith was greater than any Jew's he'd known. Jesus said that Gentiles will be welcomed at his feast in heaven.

And so I put this to you if you're a Gentile listening this morning/evening. Do you understand the privilege that's being spoken of here? Do you see how great it is that any person who has faith in Jesus, from any nation on earth, can sit next to Abraham at the heavenly banquet?

x) the kingdom: not for everyone

But on the other side of the coin is Number 10. Heaven is open to all. But hell is also real. And, shockingly, Jesus says here that some of the sons of the kingdom⁷, some of the Israelites, would find themselves there. In a place of weeping and gnashing teeth, in a place of suffering and of despair⁸.

And so I ask you this very sobering question. Do you believe in hell? Like Jesus does? And do you fear it? Perhaps for yourself? Or maybe for others?

3. The Most Important Question.

Well, there are ten things that strike me from these verses. I hope you'll take a few minutes after the sermon today/tonight to think about what most strikes you. And with each of the observations I've offered this morning/evening, I've also thrown some questions at you. And I hope you'll think about them too. But at the heart of this passage is really one key question that's more important than all others. I think I'd say that all the other questions really come back to this one. Have you come to Jesus? And are you coming to him, each and every day?

That's what the two men in these verses did. Verse 2. A man with leprosy came to Jesus. Verse 5. A centurion came to him. They came with faith- recognising their need, seeing who Jesus was and what he could do. And given their needs, they undoubtedly came to the right person- they came to someone who loved them tenderly, they came to the man who, in the purposes of God is at the centre of human history, they came to someone who has the authority of God himself, an authority that meant there was nothing they could ask of him that he couldn't effortlessly do.

And so I ask you this question today. Have you done what those men did? Have you come to Jesus in your need? Have you admitted that you do need him- that you need

⁷ This is literally what the words at the start of verse 12 mean.

⁸ Don Carson is the commentator who suggests that 'weeping' speaks of suffering as 'teeth gnashing' speaks of despair. See *Matthew, Mark, Luke*, p.203.

him to heal you- not just your body but your soul? Have you come to see that there is a heaven and a hell, and those who join God in heaven are only those who place their faith in Jesus? Have you come to Jesus? If you've never done that before, then these verses are full of reasons not to wait another moment.

But even if you're already a believer in Jesus today, and perhaps you have been for years, I ask you the same question. With the needs that you have today- have you come to him? With the issues and anxieties that tomorrow brings, to whom will you turn? If you're anything like me, sometimes you face your troubles and trials in a strangely forgetful way, wrestling with them on your own, or turning to others for help but neglecting him. But whatever your needs may be- however big they may seem to you, or however small, he is more than sufficient to meet them. Whether he can is not even a question. The only question is whether he's willing. And you won't know the answer to that unless you ask. So do you? Will you? With whatever is on your mind, with whatever burden you carry, with whatever sin you've committed, with whatever fear you're gripped by, with whatever sorrow you can't shake- come to him. Come to Jesus- the Jesus we meet in these verses: indescribably powerful, and unspeakably tender. Come to him- to Jesus who is the same yesterday, today, and forever⁹.

⁹ Hebrews 13:8