

‘SUCH AUTHORITY’ MATTHEW 9:1-8

[St Mark’s Northbridge, Sunday, August 29, 2021, Online Services]

1. The “F” Word.

We have a word in the English language of such great stigma and distastefulness that we refer to it by using different words. It’s a word of such significance that we have found a way to talk about it without using the word itself. We have a whole other phrase to reference it. And we often use this phrase in hushed tones. “The f word”.

And what I want to suggest to you today/tonight is that we Christians have a word that is in some ways like that, but which in other ways couldn’t be more different. It’s a word in the Bible of such great importance and value that we might refer to it by using different words. It’s a word of such significance that we talk about it all the time. And it too is a word we might speak of in hushed tones, but for very different reasons. “Our f word”. Forgiveness.

That’s what I want to talk to you about this morning/evening. Because, at its heart, this is what this passage is about. Forgiveness- a word so precious to Christian people that it’s hard to think of a word we care about more. Forgiveness- a word that summarises for us profoundly what we find when we come to Jesus. Forgiveness- a word with the power to bring a humble hush over every Christian gathering and into every Christian heart. As I hope it will today/tonight- for us, for you.

Let me read for us the first 8 verses of Matthew 9.

[Read Matthew 9:1-8]

2. The People Jesus Meets.

- the paralytic’s friends

I’d like to reflect on these verses with you today/tonight by thinking about the different people Jesus meets in these verses- starting with the paralytic’s friends¹. Because these men are like others we met in chapter 8. They see their need clearly- in their case the profound disability of their friend. But they also see clearly that Jesus can help them. And the combination of these two things- seeing your need clearly, and seeing Jesus clearly- this is what Jesus calls ‘faith’. And theirs is a very commendable faith in his eyes. These men, on behalf of their friend, come to Jesus with great expectation.

¹ Jesus crossing over to the other side of the lake in verse 1 probably should be seen as his willingness to comply with the wishes of the people in 8:34 who pleaded with him to leave their region.

- the paralytic

But what about the paralytic himself? Well, one suspects he shared the faith of his friends². He had a problem which he sincerely hoped Jesus would solve. Except Jesus seems to think he's got two problems that need solving. And I suspect it surprised the paralytic to learn that Jesus thought his sin was a more pressing issue than his disability. So when Jesus pronounces at the end of verse 2 that his sins are forgiven, it's fascinating to wonder what the paralytic's reaction might have been like. Matthew doesn't tell us. But we can imagine. Was he tempted to cry out: 'Jesus, are you kidding me? Can't you keep your spiritual stuff for another time? I want my legs sorted!' That's one option. Or perhaps the paralytic knew instinctively that Jesus had done the better thing for him? And he perhaps he wept for joy? We'll never know.

But what I can tell you for certain is that there would be a time in the days that followed this, certainly at the gates of heaven if not before, when this man would be in no doubt that Jesus had put first things first. Because when every man comes to the gates of heaven, disability poses no barrier to entry. You can enter God's glory with paralysed legs. But there's no way to enter his glory if you're an unforgiven sinner! So in the end, I can guarantee you, this man would've been very grateful for what Jesus said here- grateful that Jesus could see his greater need so clearly.

- the teachers of the law

But then what about the teachers of the law? Fascinatingly, they invent a third reaction to the words of Jesus in verse 2. They neither scoff at Jesus for ignoring the man's paralysis, nor express their delight in his forgiveness. Instead, they want to know by what authority Jesus can say such a thing! And whilst that might not be a reaction I'd expect, when you think about it, it actually showed a lot of insight. Because they instantly knew what Jesus was claiming. They believed that only God had the authority to declare a person forgiven. And so, because they didn't consider for a moment that Jesus could be God, they drew the logical conclusion. He was blaspheming. He was claiming divine authority for himself. It was a very serious accusation.

And, of course, unless Jesus does have the authority of God, he's guilty as charged. So what he does next is to offer the teachers of the law, and everyone else who was watching, a reason to believe that he might not be blaspheming after all. He wants them all to know that he, the Son of Man, does have authority on earth to forgive sins. And so he heals the man as a display of his divine authority. He suggests that if he can do the seemingly more difficult thing then they would know that he also had the authority to forgive- to say what could roll off anyone's tongue, but which could only be powerful if it was uttered by God himself. Which it was.

- the crowds

² And it's quite possible that Jesus' commendation in verse 2 is for him as well.

And so we come to verse 8 and to the crowds. And what the teachers of the law were highly sceptical about, they seem to embrace. They hear what Jesus has said, and they see³ what Jesus has done, and they are filled with awe⁴.

And they praise God. Why? For giving 'such authority' to a man. Such authority. And I don't think they mean by this: 'wow- this guy has a lot of authority'. Rather, I think they mean, 'wow- Jesus has this kind of authority'. They see that he has the kind of authority that can heal a man with just a word. And they see that he has the kind of authority that can tell what people are thinking. And they see that he has the kind of authority that can pronounce God's forgiveness of a person's sins. Such authority. Such authority. The kind of authority that once again reminds us of what chapter 1 claimed. That the baby Jesus was Immanuel- God with us.

3. The Jesus People Met.

These are the people Jesus meets in these verses. And they all have something to teach us. But, as always, the most important thing in the gospel story is not to focus on the people who meet Jesus, but the Jesus these people met. So what do we learn about him in these verses? Let me mention three things.

- unexpected sight

Firstly, his unexpected sight. Because this passage reminds us that Jesus sees everything! In verse 2 he sees the faith in the hearts of the paralytic's friends. And in verse 4 he sees the inner thoughts of the outraged Jewish leaders. Jesus doesn't just see what others see. He sees the inside of people. He knows us. All of us. He sees everything there is to see in us. And that's unnerving to say the least, isn't it? Perhaps downright terrifying. Because one of the ways we like to deal with sin is to make sure other people don't know how dark our hearts can be. And we often like to try and not even be honest with ourselves about it. But we can't fool Jesus. He sees everything. Which means that when it comes to him, at least, we need a different way of dealing with sin than simply trying to hide it.

- unexpected authority

But secondly, unexpected authority. And this has been a significant theme in Matthew's gospel already, hasn't it? When Jesus finished the Sermon on the Mount at the end of Matthew 7 we heard that crowds were amazed by his teaching because he taught as one who had authority. And then in chapter 8 we've seen in each new incident that Jesus has authority over sickness, over evil spirits, and even over the wind and the waves. And now we see that his authority extends even to this. To granting people the forgiveness of God.

³ Note that this is the fourth significant use of the word 'see' in these verses. Verse 2: the readers are called to 'see/behold'. Verse 2: Jesus sees the faith of the friends (and the paralytic?). Verse 4: Jesus sees what the Jewish leaders were thinking.

⁴ Literally 'fear'.

And his authority to do this really does matter doesn't it? The teachers of the law may've reached the wrong conclusion about Jesus but they were definitely asking the right question. If some random person walked up to you in the street and told you God forgave your sins it wouldn't make a jot of difference to your life or your eternity. In fact, if someone promises you God's forgiveness but doesn't have the authority to do so it's not only deceitful but cruel. It is an easy thing to "say" isn't it? "Your sins are forgiven." But only God can actually do it. Only God can forgive the sins people commit against him. So if Jesus did not have God's authority to do this- he was a blasphemer. And he was much worse than that too. But if he did have God's authority- to heal sickness, and cast out demons, and calm storms, and forgive sins- then he really must be Immanuel. He must be God with his people. And if that's true, then every sane person will want to know him. Do you?

- the unexpected gift

Because the third we learn about Jesus in these verses is that he has the most unexpected gift for all who come to him. It's one thing to have the authority to grant God's forgiveness. But it's another thing to be willing to. It's not enough is it, that Jesus is powerful to forgive. We also need him to be gracious in granting forgiveness. And the people who were there that day the paralytic was brought to Jesus- they learnt that Jesus was.

I hope you've been asking this morning/evening where we find ourselves in these verses? That's always a good question when we read the Bible, isn't it? So what do you think? Should we be like the men who brought their friend to Jesus- coming to him in our need with great expectation? Of course we should. And should we be like the crowds who see who Jesus is and respond with awe and praise? Absolutely, yes. But is it not true that, more than anything else, we should find ourselves in these verses in that paralysed man on the mat at Jesus' feet- someone with an invisible need far greater than any visible one, someone who found that Jesus had power and grace greater than he'd even imagined, someone who arrived that day a sinner, but who went home forgiven.

You see Matthew's gospel has already sketched out the most remarkable picture of Jesus. But in these verses Matthew adds something stunning to the portrait. Up till now we've seen Jesus come to the sick to heal, to the demon-possessed to cleanse, to the fearful to comfort, to those on the fringes to welcome. But in these verses we see Jesus coming to sinners to forgive. And in this moment we see a picture of what the whole gospel is about- because as Matthew flagged for us in chapter 1, Jesus came to the world to save⁵. And what Matthew shows us here is that that epic story of global salvation, is also a personal story of individual forgiveness. Jesus comes to the world to save. And he goes to the cross to make it possible. So he can come to me to forgive.

And how I need him to. I, like you, have many needs. There are all sorts of things I could take to him and ask him to fix or solve. But I know deep down that, like that

⁵ Matthew 1:21

paralytic, I have one need that's greater than all others. I need help for my sin. I think back over the years of my life and remember so many foolish choices, so many times I've hurt people I loved, so many careless words, so many shameful thoughts. And I can look back even over the past week and feel a sincere sorrow for many failures. Sisters and brothers, I don't say this to you with any kind of embellishment or false humility. I mean it. There are many things in my history and my heart that I'd prefer you never know. But Jesus sees it all. And I am ravaged by that thought. I know how much I need his forgiveness- how desperately, how singularly.

And that's why I love these verses. Because they tell me that the Jesus who sees it all, that same Jesus has the authority to wash it all away. The same Jesus who knows everything, has come to me to forgive everything. To me- so undeserving, so needy. And yet- this grace- this unexpected gift. Such authority. Such authority. Forgiveness. That sweet, sweet word. Our "f" word. Forgiveness. And my ravaged heart is healed. And I weep for joy.

The story of that paralysed man is my story. And for most of you listening today, I know it's yours too. And I hope you'll hear this word again today and that you'll know it's the word at the heart of your life as well. Forgiveness. And I hope you'll be as joyful to know it as I am. And if you're tuning in today and this isn't yet your story, then I want you to know in no uncertain terms, that it can be. Just say the word. And he will say this word to you. 'Take heart, son . . . Take heart, daughter; your sins are forgiven.'