

The Prayer of Asking

A sermon given on 8th February 2015 at St Michael's Church, Sandhurst by Rev John A. Castle

Reading: Mark 2:1-12

Introduction

Yesterday I was in Basingstoke for a concert which I was playing in. I knew that I would have more than 2 hours free between the rehearsal in the afternoon and the concert in the evening, and I had sent a text message to an acquaintance whom I hadn't seen for the best part of a year to see if we could meet up. When I'd last seen her, just before she moved to Basingstoke, she was going through all kinds of financial and family difficulties, and I wondered how she was. But I got no response to my text message.

Imagine my surprise when, as I was wandering around the aisles of Boots, I heard this voice saying "John, what are you doing in Basingstoke?" She had changed her phone number and hadn't got my message. Had it not been for this surprise meeting I'm not sure how I'd have contacted her. But we were able to catch up – and I found it hard not to see the hand of God in our meeting. It was, in a rather indirect way, an answer to prayer.

No doubt each of us could speak of such unexpected encounters, co-incidences which came just at the right time, in which we discern the working of God. But none of them probably had quite the impact of Jesus' meeting with the paralysed man which was the subject of our gospel reading today, an encounter which left those present saying "We have never seen anything like this!"

A strong sense of need

As we begin a series of sermons on prayer, I'd like to use this story as an illustration of the prayer of asking – probably the kind of prayer we do the most of. And we will look first of all at the people who made the prayer, and then at Jesus' response to their prayer – both aspects rather unusual in their own way.

First of all, it's noticeable that the request for healing wasn't actually made by the person who needed it, but by his 4 friends. The man himself was paralysed, helpless, unable to work, dependent, probably depressed. How he got like that we don't know – perhaps he'd fallen off a ladder and hurt his back. Perhaps it was due to some serious illness. But whatever it was, his friends weren't willing to accept that he remain crippled for the rest of his life. I suppose somehow, consciously or unconsciously, they had a vision in their minds of him being restored to how he was before. They longed to have him back on his feet, sharing a pint at the local tavern, perhaps able to provide for his family again. And they wanted this very badly. So they were highly motivated to get him to Jesus. Are we that motivated about our prayers? How much do we really care about our needs and the needs of others?

Faith in action

The friends didn't sit around thinking "can Jesus heal him?" "Will he want to heal him?" "What will other people think?" They loaded the paralysed man onto a stretcher and carried him to the house where Jesus was.

The crowd around the door was the first obstacle they had to overcome. With so many people crowded inside the house and more crowding around the outside, trying to see or hear through the door and windows, there was no way that paralysed man was going to get through. But necessity is the mother of invention. The typical house in those days had a ground floor only, with stairs going up the outside of the house onto a flat roof, used for storage, and drying things. If they couldn't get their friend to Jesus by a horizontal route, the 4 men would get him to Jesus by a vertical route. So up the stairs they bundled him, and started dismantling the roof.

Can you imagine the scene inside the house? Everyone is paying attention to Jesus as he teaches. But then some people notice bits of the ceiling falling down, and isn't long before everyone is looking up at the hole

that is appearing above Jesus, and Jesus stops talking and just waits patiently until the paralysed man is let down by ropes and comes to rest at his feet.

I think we can learn a lot from these four men. They believed Jesus could heal their friend, but making the request required a lot of effort. Their “prayer” involved practical action. Does ours? The man ended up being healed not only because of the power of Jesus but also through his friends' effort. In fact, there's no record of them actually speaking any words to Jesus: their actions in lowering their friend down through the roof to lie at Jesus' feet said it all. What practical things can we do to help our prayers to get answered? It's great to pray for the refugees in Iraq and Syria, but maybe we also need to send the money or the clothes which will help our prayers to be answered. It's been great to see how a number of people have responded to the recent collection of clothes for these refugees.

A surprising response

I imagine that one reason this story was remembered and finally written down in Mark's gospel was the extraordinary way the paralysed man ended up in front of Jesus. But I suspect that what happened next would also have been worth telling and retelling. Jesus' first response to the paralytic was not what everyone expected, to heal his paralysis and make him walk again. No, Jesus' words were “My son, your sins are forgiven”. It's not the case that Jesus usually did this before healing people. Of course Jesus could see that he was paralysed. But Jesus knew a lot more about him too. And I can only assume from Jesus' words that he saw this man's most important need as being forgiveness.

Now I suppose there may have been a connection between the man's physical state and his spiritual and emotional state. Some physical conditions have a psychosomatic cause; for example, we all know that prolonged stress can cause heart disease and other ailments. The man may have suffered a psychological trauma which has resulted in his being physically paralysed. Or there may have been a simpler connection – perhaps he fell off a ladder while trying to break into someone's house or escaping from a window after an adulterous liaison.

We don't need to know the details. What we do learn from this story, though, is that it shows Jesus hadn't come to earth mainly to cure illnesses, but to bring us all forgiveness of our sins and reconciliation with God and with others through his death on the cross.

Jesus knows all about us – our spiritual condition, the state of our family and our relationships, our work, our emotional wellbeing and our health. It is good for us to approach him with a request for help, whether for ourselves or, as in the case of the 4 friends in the story, for someone else. But as we bring people to God in prayer – and as we bring our own need to God – it may be that he will show us that there is more to pray about!

Of course, Jesus didn't ignore the man's paralysis either. He told him to get up, and the man walked out of the house carrying his stretcher.

Conclusion

Those who saw the miracle that day went away amazed by what they had seen. The vision and persistence of the four friends, who cared so deeply for the paralysed man that they found a way around all the obstacles that stood in their way, is a challenge to us – how deeply do we care about the things we pray for, and are we willing to show the same persistence until we see a situation changed?

The other lesson for us, I think, is that we need to be willing to trust God that he knows what is best for the people and situations we bring to him in prayer. If we give him free rein in how to answer our prayers, he may do things we don't expect but which we need more than the things we asked him about in the first place! If we take prayer this seriously, we may well, like the people who saw the paralysed man healed, go away amazed at the grace of God.