

Trinity 19

I take as my text this morning from St. Matthew's Gospel:

But that ye may know that the Son of Man hath power on earth to forgive sins...Arise, take up thy bed, and go unto thine house.

Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be always acceptable unto thee, O Lord, my Strength and my Redeemer.

We turn today to a story we have heard perhaps many times; the story of a miraculous healing that has left, perhaps, an indelible picture in our mind of a paralyzed man being let down on a stretcher through a hole in the roof, right in front of Jesus as he was holding forth.

You're quite right to think this is not exactly what we heard in today's Gospel from Matthew, but when we look at the same story as told by St. Mark, and again by St. Luke, we find more elaborate accounts of this miracle. And while in his account St. Matthew has left out the detail of the man being lowered through the roof, still, in its simplicity it has much to say.

Jesus was in Capernaum, a place he much frequented, where a crowd had gathered to listen to him as he preached. Of course, amongst the crowd were Scribes and Pharisees, not at all unusual. Almost any crowd would have their share of Scribes and Pharisees.

The house St. Matthew describes was probably the family home of St. Peter. Typically, it would be like most homes, a mini compound with a courtyard where people could gather.

Rather than being inside the house, Jesus was most likely sitting under the veranda, addressing a rather large crowd that filled the courtyard and spilled out into the street. The veranda was covered with a thatched roof that ran around the entire courtyard. It was through this roof that a hole was made

We can easily picture the man, lying on a stretcher as friends lower him through the hole in the roof to the ground where Jesus was. The man was suffering from what was described as the palsy, a form of paralysis.

Now, based on the thinking of that time, the man's paralysis would be considered the result of sin. It was the belief of the time that illness and sin were linked, and not just illness but almost any kind of misfortune, as well.

The nature of the man's sin was not important to the story except that, according to their belief, it had resulted in his paralysis. However, when Jesus saw the man, he knew at a glance the case history.

Matthew recounts that Jesus saw the faith of the man's friends, and greeted him with the words, *Son, be of good cheer; thy sins be forgiven thee.*

Immediately, the Scribes seized upon this, not out loud; but Jesus knew what they were thinking; he knew what their reaction would be; and he also knew the moment was right to make a particular point, indeed, a proclamation.

Apparently having come from Jerusalem specifically to instigate a confrontation with Jesus, the Scribes and Pharisees were waiting for the opportunity to openly oppose him. In their hostility they could only see Jesus as a blasphemer: did he not say to the man, *thy sins be forgiven thee*....only God can forgive sins.

From the point of view of the Pharisees: if Jesus claimed to forgive sins, as only God can do, where would the proof be? For any man can say *thy sins be forgiven thee*, and it would be impossible for anyone to know with certainty if the words had any effect.

But our Lord took the upper hand and, instead of being confronted, offered them a challenge.

And Jesus knowing their thoughts said, Wherefore think ye evil in your hearts? For whether is easier to say, Thy sins be forgiven thee; or to say, Arise and walk?

Knowing the spiritual condition of the paralyzed man, as well as his physical condition, Jesus first took away the man's spiritual troubles, then healed him of his physical ailment.

The Scribes and Pharisees were right on one hand. Jesus was indeed claiming to forgive sins, exactly as they were thinking, that is, as only God can do. But Jesus was also making good his claim to be the Son of God, and he would offer the proof.

So, how could Jesus prove to the Pharisees that his words of forgiveness did have effect? He made his statement conditional: *For whether is easier, to say, Thy sins be forgiven thee; or say, Arise and Walk?* He coupled the words of forgiveness with a visible sign.

To everyone's amazement, the paralyzed man got up and walked, visible proof of his divine power. Still, this and other miracles did not sway the Pharisees and Scribes from their hardened opinion that Jesus was a blasphemer.

Here, in the eyes of the Pharisees, was a man uttering the most blasphemous words: *...that ye may know that the Son of Man hath power on earth to forgive sins....* equating himself with God.

But for Jesus, this moment was part of his design to prove that, though humbled on earth, he had retained his divine power. His Incarnation had not emptied him of his divine prerogatives, and by his becoming man, he had not ceased to be God.

Matthew punctuates the occasion, writing:

But when the multitudes saw it they marveled, and glorified God, which had given such power unto men.

The people, seeing what Jesus had done, perceived that divine forgiveness can be committed to man, the establishment of a principle, and a foretaste of the priest's authority to pronounce absolution of sins in the name of the Church.

A distinction must be made — it must be quite clear that *Christ's own power to forgive....is original and absolute*. The ministerial power is *delegated and conditional*.

Thus, we can also see in this story the link between our spiritual well-being and our physical well-being. Christ first removed the man's spiritual trouble, then healed his physical ailment.

So it is in our lives, the spiritual and the physical, closely linked. How delicate a role our spirituality plays in our physical well-being. How the cares of the world can press down upon us with such a weight that we become physically ill.

While God does not will any affliction upon us, and while he may not always effect a miraculous healing of our physical infirmities, he does provide for our spiritual needs through the Church, the Body of Christ; not only through the Sacraments of the Church, but also through the fellowship of the Church, through prayer, through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit.

St. James, in the 5th chapter of his General Epistle, verses 13 through 16, addresses that spiritual and physical relationship, and its link with the Sacraments and fellowship of the Church. He says:

...Is one of you ill? He should send for the elders to pray over him and anoint him with oil in the name of the Lord. The prayer offered in faith will save the sick man, the Lord will raise him from his bed, and any sins he may have committed will be forgiven. Therefore confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, and then you will be healed.

Here, St. James is describing one of **the Seven Sacraments of the Church: Holy Unction**, a Sacrament often overlooked or ignored; perhaps, because it has been so much associated with *Last Rites*.

Our **Book of Common Prayer** provides for **Holy Unction** of the sick through the anointing with oil, and the laying on of hands, calling upon the healing power of the Holy Spirit.

On the second Sunday of each month, we have our monthly healing service with the anointing with oil and the laying on of hands.

Now, as we have seen in the Gospel passage for today, Christ performed a miracle to prove not only his claim to be the Son of God, with the power to forgive sins, but also proving that by his taking on humanity through the Incarnation, he had not ceased to be God. And from this, we can foresee Jesus establishing the principle that divine forgiveness can be committed to man in his **Name** through the Church.

This was fully realized before his Ascension when Jesus appeared to the Apostles and, as St. John recounts:

*...He breathed on them, and saith unto them,
Receive ye the Holy Ghost; whose soever sins ye
remit, they are remitted unto them; and whose
soever sins ye retain, they are retained.*

This authority given to the Apostles has been retained by the Church — the One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church — and passed down through the ages in **Apostolic Succession**.

So, from the simplicity of St. Matthew's account of the healing of the man with palsy, we can see how essential the fellowship of the Christian Community is, both to our physical well-being and our spiritual well-being, and the intricate role of faith in our lives, that indeed, we are a community in Christ.

We can also be comforted that, whatever our infirmity, whatever our burden, however heavy laden we are, our Lord Jesus Christ is ever ready to offer us the refreshing comfort of his Divine forgiveness and healing power through the Holy Spirit.