

Sunday 8th October 2023.

Followers Of The Way

Ancient Discipleship For Modern Christians

“Heal whatever is broken”

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Mark 8v22-26 Jesus Heals a Blind Man at Bethsaida

²² They came to Bethsaida, and some people brought a blind man and begged Jesus to touch him. ²³ He took the blind man by the hand and led him outside the village. When he had spit on the man’s eyes and put his hands on him, Jesus asked, “Do you see anything?”

²⁴ He looked up and said, “I see people; they look like trees walking around.”

²⁵ Once more Jesus put his hands on the man’s eyes. Then his eyes were opened, his sight was restored, and he saw everything clearly.

²⁶ Jesus sent him home, saying, “Don’t even go into the village.”

This week is the 6th part of our autumn series called ‘Followers of the way’ looking at ten waymarks and three overarching principles of a way of life commended by the community of St. Aidan and St. Hilda. These ‘Waymarks’ are practical distinctives for us as Christians to develop our discipleship and to learn how we can follow Jesus on a day-to-day basis. So over the past five weeks we have looked at being a lifelong learner, journeying with a soul friend, keeping a rhythm of prayer work and recreation, living as simply as possible and then last week, chiming in with harvest, was ‘celebrating and caring for creation.’ This week’s waymark is the instruction to ‘heal whatever is broken’, because every Christian is called to be a practitioner of healing in various different ways.

Just this week I was thrilled to learn that someone was healed here at All Saints recently during a time of worship. Claire Sunthralingham had been struggling with ME and felt like coming to church was like trudging through treacle. But nevertheless, she chose to press in to the Lord Jesus and during a time of worship, something clicked internally which released a sudden flow of energy and freedom, and it has remained with them ever since! Praise God. Do speak to her afterwards for the full story but I'm lining her up for a testimony over the next few weeks. Over the years I have seen people healed of sight issues, hearing loss, back pain, cancer, addictions and I know God can heal conditions in an instant which is wonderful. Yet at the same time over the last few months many of us prayed faithfully for Jenny and others with health challenges only to see their condition deteriorate rapidly. So healing is not simply a routine formula. Ultimately, we know every human being will face death at some point – it is one of the only certainties in life. However, we do see in the ministry of Jesus a concern for relieving suffering, and bringing healing, wholeness and freedom to people wherever he went.

Jesus is perfect theology. He said 'if you have seen me you have seen the Father', so in Jesus, the nature and character of God are fully displayed. When we read about Jesus healing the sick, casting out evil spirits and touching the unclean, this reflects God's heart for the poor and broken and so healing whatever is broken must be a priority for us too.

In the Old Testament, in Exodus 15:26 God declares that one His characteristic names is *Jehovah Rapha* – 'I am the God who heals you'. Throughout the Bible healing is part of God's nature so we should expect him to break in and do it today because he is the same yesterday, today and forever.

In his book 'followers of the Way' Simon Reed suggests that there are three types of healing which we should be praying for and practicing in our way of life as followers of the Way of Jesus:

1. Healing of people – physically, emotionally, and spiritually
2. Healing of places and communities
3. Healing of relationships

So healing has a wider remit than just physical healing, and Jesus demonstrated all of these while he walked the earth. One of his first acts of ministry was to announce that the Kingdom of heaven had arrived, which ushers in the renewal of the whole earth, the defeat of death and an end to suffering. Jesus inaugurated the kingdom through his life, death and resurrection, but at this moment we are living in an in-between time. We look forward to the fullness of the Kingdom when Christ returns but, in the meantime, we only experience glimpses of the Kingdom here on earth, like beams of sunlight breaking through the clouds. Healing is a sign of the kingdom of God breaking in to the here and now, and Jesus showed us what can happen when we pray for others and follow the leading of the Holy Spirit.

Our passage gives us a fascinating insight into some of the dynamics at play when Jesus healed a blind man at Bethsaida.

The context of the passage in Mark's gospel is that chapter 8 is a turning point in Jesus' ministry when word about his teaching and miracles is starting to spread like wildfire, and it is starting to get politically dangerous for him.

He comes to a town near Galilee called Bethsaida which was possibly the hometown of a few of the disciples and some people bring a blind man to Jesus begging him for healing.

But it is fascinating that Jesus first leads the man outside the village before putting spittle on his eyes and healing him. It takes two attempts for the man to see properly which is extraordinary in itself because it is Jesus doing the healing. Then finally Jesus tells the man to go straight home and to avoid going back into the village.

Jesus goes out of his way to keep the man away from the village of Bethsaida. Why?

Well we know that Jesus wanted to avoid what today we might call media frenzy, in order to allow himself time to communicate his message and ministry carefully. But there is also something else at play here.

Jesus had to take the blind man outside the village in order to heal him, because something about the character of the community was resistant and sceptical.

In Matthew 11v21, Jesus gives this damning indictment: “Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the miracles that were performed in you had been performed in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes.’

Bethsaida has come to represent those who have heard the gospel, had the opportunity to welcome the work of Jesus and yet have hardened their hearts against him.

Mark reported that the same thing happened in Jesus’ home town, where chapter 6v5 says ‘He could not do any miracles there, except lay his hands on a few sick people and heal them.’

So clearly a community can be hardened to the Gospel and unwilling to repent and change its ways.

In the UK we have wonderful health care, insurance to cover disasters and government and business taking care of our communities. Don’t get me wrong, I am grateful to God for the NHS and the fabulous care and healing it provides. But it is possible that our mindset all too easily defaults to fixing ourselves rather than leaning on the power of God.

The blind man was brought to Jesus by people who were *begging* him to touch the man. Are we willing to get on our knees and beg the Lord to come and touch this church and our community with his healing power?

My friend David Bute in Ukraine told me directly: ‘Tom we see God doing extraordinary things in Ukraine much more than I see in England.’ I heard this too when I went to Kenya. When they pray for healing it is certainly not a quiet affair! Perhaps when people have less options and cry out to God in desperation to save them, the spiritual barriers that surround us are overcome.

The question in my mind is this: How can we ensure we are a community that embraces and welcomes the healing work of the Holy Spirit?

The first thing we need to do is acknowledge our spiritual need. I acknowledge my poverty of Spirit when it comes to seeing the power of God at work. I always say I am a pragmatist – but I confess that may sometimes be another way of saying I have low expectations.

All it would take for this church to be full every Sunday would be for word to spread that the healing power of God is present a real and tangible way.

In John 14 verse 12 Jesus promised: 'Very truly I tell you, whoever believes in me will do the works I have been doing, and they will do even greater things than these, because I am going to the Father.¹³ And I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son.¹⁴ You may ask me for anything in my name, and I will do it.'

So if we believe in Jesus and ask in his name, in other words in accordance with his will, he promises to do it. In the next Chapter of Mark Jesus tells a desperate Father 'If you can believe, all things are possible to him who believes.'" And immediately the father of the child cried out and said with tears, "Lord, I believe; help my unbelief!"

I don't think it is down to the individual who needs healing to have faith. But somebody in the room does. Faith is the conduit through which God pours in his power.

So can we continue to be a community of faith in which God regularly does miracles? I believe we can. We have seen God moving in wonderful ways in the past but we do need to acknowledge our tendency towards self-reliance and scepticism. In humility and repentance, let's help each other raise our expectations that God is willing and able to do it!

God is Jehovah Jireh our provider. He is Jehovah Rapha our healer. Let's humbly pray in accordance with his name, that his power will come and touch this whole community.