Westlake Church Lausanne

27.11.16 - MATTHEW 9:18-38

HOW JESUS REALLY SEES US

Introduction

What do you see when you look in the mirror? I mean when you take a good look at yourself, who you are as a person. Do you like what you see?

I would imagine that some of us are not happy with what we see. Maybe you feel like everyone else is much more talented and successful than you and you feel useless and worthless. Maybe you feel awkward or different or like people don't like you that much, and you wish you could feel more self-confident and accepted. Maybe you're disappointed with choices you've made or deeds you've done and you feel like a failure. If this is you, you are certainly not alone. Many of us feel trapped in a miserable downward spiral of chronically low self-esteem.

I would also imagine that some of us feel OK with what we see. You know you have talents and you're doing well in life. You're confident around other people and know they like you. You look back at your life and you don't feel you've made any major errors. You know you're far from perfect, but on the whole you feel pretty good about yourself.

Or perhaps you see a bit of both images from time to time! However you see yourself, we all want to feel good about ourselves, don't we. We want to feel like we're worth something. We want people to value us. We want to see ourselves as basically good, useful, likeable people. But how can we ever know if we are seeing ourselves accurately? What if we're looking into one of those fairground mirrors - one of those ones that distorts the image? Maybe you see yourself as worse, or better, than you really are. Don't you wish it was possible to know what you *really* look like?

Well, it *is* possible. But there's only one mirror that can show us. It's the mirror that God holds up. We need to know how *God* sees us. Does he like what he sees? Or is he disappointed? I wonder how you instinctively feel about that question. That's the self-esteem question that matters more than any other, isn't it.

As we've looked in the mirror of Matthew's Gospel, it has to be said, the image we've seen has not been great, has it. In the Sermon on the Mount, we saw how far short we've all fallen of God's perfect standards. Over the last three weeks we've seen that we're like unworthy outsiders, sick in our hearts. But we've also seen that Jesus looks on us with compassion. And this week's passage - the final one in this section of Matthew - is going to hold up the mirror once again...

When I first read this passage I admit I was a bit disappointed. I was a bit like, "what, just a few more healing stories? What new point can I possibly draw out of this? It feels like a bit of an anticlimax to this section of Matthew". But the more I've looked at the passage, the more I've understood why Matthew's placed it here. It doesn't really add any new

information, no, but it's like Matthew takes a cloth and gives the mirror one last wipe, so that that image of ourselves comes into focus. And we see just what we look like in God's eyes.

So I invite you to come back with me to 1st century Palestine and to imagine that we are amongst Jesus' followers at each one of these four incidents. What do we see in God's mirror? Well, here's the first thing:

1. <u>We're all desperately sick</u>

In the first incident, we are surprised as we watch a respectable synagogue ruler come up to Jesus. He drops to his knees, a position of humility and pleading, his pride and his propriety have gone out of the window. Why? His daughter has just died. Imagine that was you, imagine the devastation you'd be feeling, as you said, "my daughter, my son, has just died." We can tangibly feel this poor man's panic and despair, like staring into a black hole. To make matters worse, as all good Jews know, we realise that dead bodies are ceremonially unclean. How can Jesus go near her? But this man is desperate. Jesus is his last hope.

As we follow Jesus on his way to this man's house, he suddenly turns round and speaks to a woman in the crowd. We discover that she has had a discharge of blood for twelve years. Whilst not quite in the same league as death, we can see the long years of pain and sorrow written in the lines on her face. Not only was this a miserable condition to endure, but she too was ceremonially unclean, cut off from religious and social life. She felt so unworthy that she didn't even dare kneel before Jesus, but secretly she reached out to touch the hem of his cloak, hoping against hope that she might be healed. She is desperate. Jesus is her last hope.

At another time, we are walking with Jesus when we notice two men following us. Another bolt of horror - we realise that they are both completely blind. Not only is blindness one of the worst conditions to have to endure, in those days there was no welfare state. We know these guys are jobless and poverty-stricken. And guess what, they too are ceremonially unclean. Unable to even see the one they were calling to, they resort to the only thing they can do: cry out for mercy. They are desperate. Jesus is their last hope.

And as if all this wasn't horrible enough, a little bit later we see a sorry-looking figure being brought to Jesus. We wait for the man to explain his problem, but his mouth remains firmly shut. But his distraught, delirious eyes communicate all sorts of untold horrors. We recoil with fear and disgust. This man has a demon. A demon that made him mute. This is scary stuff. And, yes, you guessed it, this man was most definitely ceremonially unclean. He is desperate. Jesus is his last hope.

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A couple of weeks ago we saw Jesus heal some pretty nasty diseases. But these incidents are on a whole different level. Bleeding and blindness, demons and death. It's like a catalogue of the worst human horrors imaginable. And all of them unclean, cut off from God and other people. Desperate.

But then in verse 35, Matthew zooms out to reveal that there are in fact vast crowds of people in need of healing. Jesus saw, not just those four people, but the entire population as in a desperate situation. And he doesn't just have disease in mind. He was also *preaching*. Matthew told us in chapter 4 what he was teaching: *"repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand".* So when Jesus saw the desperation of their situation, it was also - we might say *especially* - their *spiritual* condition that he was looking at. Verse 12 from last week's passage confirms this: *"Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick... for I came not to call the righteous but sinners"*. Jesus explicitly pictures sin in terms of sickness. So when we see these four terrible situations, Matthew wants us to think: "this is a picture of sin". The entire population is in a desperate a situation, because they are all sin-sick.

So this passage holds up God's mirror in front of us. We are these four people. We are the crowds. We are all sin-sick. Now Andy showed us this last week, didn't he. But this passage brings the image into sharp focus. Remember the horror and desperation that we saw in each of these incidents. That's how *God* sees us. Like bleeding and blindness, demons and death, our sin is horrible, and cuts us off from God and one another. We are all desperately sick.

Self-help books and websites are everywhere at the moment, aren't they. One popular website called *The Positivity Blog* has a collection of quotations to boost your self-esteem. Let me read you one: *"To establish true self-esteem we must concentrate on our successes and forget about the failures and negatives in our lives"*. Now I appreciate that this website is trying to help people, and we certainly do need to be able to move past our failures. But imagine that the person reading that quotation is in prison for a terrible crime. *"Forget about the failures."* It starts to sound a bit hollow, doesn't it. This man can't just convince himself he's a good guy by brushing his failures under the carpet. Well, the Bible says that we are all a bit like that guy. The Bible is not some self-help book full of empty platitudes to make us see ourselves positively. On the contrary, it turns our unwilling eyes to look right into the mirror and see that we are covered with disease.

You may be thinking at this point: "I'm not sure I'm really that bad." I know this isn't easy, but think about the following situations. Are you sometimes unable to resist that harsh word to your husband or wife? Have you ever had some secret habit that you wouldn't want people to know about? Do you sometimes know what God would have you do but do your own thing anyway? Do you ever hide that you're a Christian at work? Do you daydream about your day off but have no thirst for God's Word? Do you enjoy feeling

proud of yourself but seldom feel the inclination to praise God? Are you passionate about many things but cold towards the God of glory?

The more we look, the more we see that the disease is everywhere, and it's very serious. Sin is not just a little bit of naughtiness like eating too much chocolate. It all comes back to one terrible thing: we don't treat God as he deserves. God is infinitely perfect, good and kind. He made us and has the right to rule us. He alone deserves all honour and our hearts should be aflame with love for him. Yet everywhere we look in our lives we see disobedience, self-centredness, mistreatment of the people he has made, and a lack of love for him. Because he is infinitely holy, our offence is infinitely serious. As Christians, we of course begin to make progress in fighting sin. But the disease will always be there, infecting every part of our lives. Someone once said that even our best deeds are like filthy rags.

Have you ever tried to dig a hole on a beach in dry sand? You get to a certain point, but then the sand starts to pile in. You start trying to shovel it out, but millions of grains of sand pour in on you faster than you can shovel. If we start to look, we'll see endless sins everywhere in our life. They're pouring in on top of us, faster than we can possibly deal with them, until we are buried in millions of them, and each one of them is the worst offence that has ever been committed. We might not want to admit it, but we're all much worse than we realise. The only alternative is to be like the Pharisees, who couldn't accept that they were sin-sick. The only way for them to get round what Jesus was saying, in verse 34, was to make out that he was satanic.

But there's more to this image in the mirror...

2. <u>We're all desperately loved</u>

Let's go back to those crowds. How did Jesus react when he looked on humankind, in all of their filth and shame? Let's read this wonderful comment in verse 36: *"When he saw the crowds he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd."* He looks on this desperately sin-sick crowd and he sees something else as well. Something that moves him deeply. He sees their distress and their misery. He see us all as *"harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd"*.

I used to go hiking a lot in the Lake District, in north-west England. The Lake District is famous for sheep. Everywhere you walk there are sheep, sheep, sheep. The shepherds let them roam free on the mountains. And from time to time you would see sheep in trouble. Trapped in a fence. Stuck on a cliff face. Once I even saw an entire sheep carcass, perhaps killed by a fox or by hypothermia. Sheep without a shepherd are scattered, scared, stupid, helpless, vulnerable to attack, getting themselves into mess after mess.

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The Old Testament often pictures God as a shepherd. But we are like sheep who have decided we don't need a shepherd. And now, alone and afraid, far from home, we find ourselves stuck in a ditch, trapped in some barbed wire, with the predator approaching. Let's face it, sin is miserable isn't it. We want to control our lives but we only make things more painful, stressful, frustrating. We suffer the dangers and diseases of a fallen world. We cram our hearts full of stuff but none of it can satisfy that deep aching for God. And over it all hangs the threat of death and the horror of an eternity spent under God's righteous anger.

Yes, our misery is our own fault, but amazingly, Jesus' heart is moved with compassion. How easily he could just say "sorry, you ran away, you got yourself in this mess, you've only yourself to blame". But no. No matter how ugly the image in the mirror, Jesus still looks on us as desperate, miserable, lost sheep and pities us.

And his compassion moves him to act. Think about the four people in our passage. They're all unclean outcasts. But the shepherd is compassionate. We watch in amazement as he follows the synagogue ruler without hesitation. We catch our breath as we see him reach out to touch the girl's dead hand. Will she transmit her uncleanness to him? No, he transmits life to her! Desperately sick, yet desperately loved. We wonder as we hear tender words spoken to the bleeding woman: *"take heart, daughter, your faith has made you well".* Desperately sick, yet desperately loved. We are again amazed as Jesus dares to touch the unclean eyes of the two blind men. Their cries for mercy were not in vain. Desperately sick, yet desperately loved. And finally, Jesus is so willing to help the demon-oppressed man that Matthew almost takes it for granted, saying simply: *"when the demon had been cast out, the mute man spoke"*. We are left marvelling with the crowds. Desperately sick, yet desperately loved.

Our only hope is if the shepherd takes pity on us and comes to save us. The Good Shepherd loved his lost sheep so much that he came down into their misery to seek them out. He gave his life for them on the cross, to pay the penalty for their offences against God. He wiped them clean of their filth, he cured them of their sin-sickness, and carried them home to be with God forever. We're so familiar with this idea that it's easy to miss how extraordinary it is. Jesus can see the full horror of our sin, and yet he speaks words of tenderness to us and gently tells us that he pities us in our misery. He is extraordinary, isn't he! So when we look in God's mirror, we also see someone who is desperately loved.

If you know the Narnia books, in *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader* there's a character called Eustace. He's a pretty nasty guy, full of pride, and he does some pretty bad things. Then at one point he gets turned into a dragon. On the outside he looks like a dragon, but we also realise that he kind of looks like a dragon on the inside too. And he's pretty miserable, trying to scrape the scales off himself, but he can't do anything about it. Then the lion, Aslan, who is of course a picture of Jesus, finds him and he looks on him with compassion. He takes off the dragon scales and restores him. If you saw the movie that

came out a couple of years ago, they get it the wrong way round. Eustace has to reform himself before Aslan helps him. But that totally misses the point doesn't it. In the book, Aslan has compassion on him before he's done anything to deserve it, while he still looks like a dragon, inside and out! That's how Jesus looks on us.

How can we learn to see ourselves in this way?

If you're someone who naturally has a low view of themselves, it's probably also hard for you to see yourself as desperately loved. Perhaps there's a specific sin in your past and you feel you are beyond his compassion. Or perhaps you struggle with ongoing sin that makes you feel so ugly, you just can't believe Jesus could possibly look on you with compassion. Or perhaps long years of introspection and disappointment have made you feel like you're just totally worthless. What's the answer? Actually, you need to first realise that Jesus sees your situation as far more desperate than you realise. But then look up to the cross. He is willing to bleed and die to pay for all the offences you've committed against him. Can there be any greater proof that he loves you, no matter how bad you are?

If you are not yet a Christian, he loves you even now. But to receive the forgiveness he offers, you need to do what the people in this passage did. Twice we are told, they had *faith*. That is, they simply trusted that Jesus really could save them. If you come back to Jesus and simply trust him to pay for your sins at the cross you'll hear his tender words: *"take heart, your faith has made you well"*. And if you are already a Christian, you can hear those words again and again. No matter how much sin or unworthiness you still struggle with, look up to the cross, he's washed it all away. He doesn't even see the ugliness anymore, he looks on you with nothing but love. It might take time to learn to see yourself this way, but Jesus' compassion really is the one place we can find all our sense of worth and acceptance.

If you're someone who naturally feels OK about themselves, you may feel reluctant to see your situation as that desperate. This can be true whether or not we are a Christian. Even as Christians, we can sometimes feel like we're kind of sorted and don't need compassion any more. But we all have to learn to let go of our pride and "despair of ourselves", so to speak. What joy and relief comes when we learn to feel good about ourselves only because we are desperately loved with undeserved compassion.

But there's an interesting twist to this tale...

3. Will *you* show love to the sick?

Let's read verse 36: *"Then he said to his disciples, 'The harvest is plentiful, but the labourers are few; therefore pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out labourers into his harvest' "*. As Jesus looks on the sin-sick crowd, and beyond them to all of sin-sick humanity, he sees a vast harvest field - billions of lost souls who could potentially receive

his compassion. But how will he reach them? He needs workers for the harvest field. Workers who will extend the good news of Jesus' compassion to all of humanity.

News of Jesus' power to heal spread after he raised the girl and after he healed the two blind men. Surprisingly, Jesus actually asked them not to say anything! This is probably because he doesn't want people just to see him as a healer. In the next chapter, he will send out his disciples all over the region. But they will not just heal, they will also preach the good news of God's Kingdom. So Jesus wants the news of his compassion to spread, but only if people realise that what really matters is the problem of sin.

Do you see how brilliant the natural flow of this passage is? If we've learned to see ourselves as desperately sick yet desperately loved, the obvious thing to do next is to hold up the mirror to all humanity and learn to see everybody else that way too. After all, we're all in the same boat, aren't we. Do you see all other people as sin-sick, just like you? Do you look on them with the same compassion as Jesus has for you? How can we not want to share Jesus' compassion with other desperate people?

Jesus' answer in verse 38 is to tell us to pray for more workers for the harvest. We need to pray that God would raise up people for the task. This means missionaries, yes. But it also means people who would go out into their workplaces, families and neighbourhoods with the good news of Jesus' compassion. If we care about people, we'll be regularly praying for this. But like the disciples in the next chapter, are we also willing to actually go out into our workplaces, families and neighbourhoods to reach desperately sin-sick people with the compassion of Jesus?

To finish, I want to tell you about a friend I had at university. I'll never forget when she first understood the compassion of Jesus. Sadly, I think she is wandering from the faith at the moment, but the story is still effective. She struggled herself with low self-esteem and came from a background that emphasised religious works as a means of being accepted by God. One day she came with me to church and heard that salvation was a free gift of God's grace, no matter how bad we are. Afterwards, she was visibly moved and excited. She had glimpsed for the first time that we can find our sense of worth and acceptance in God's undeserved compassion towards us. But what I especially remember is the very next thing she said. "I want my friends to hear about this too!". From receiving compassion to wanting to pass it on. Immediately. Instinctively. It was a remarkable and beautiful moment. To this day, this continues to challenge me. Compassion receivers should naturally want to be compassion sharers.