Jesus: Equal with the Father
John 5:1-24

Some years back, I heard a minister of the state church describe Jesus as being like a fluffy lamb: soft and warm and cuddly. But when you look at the gospels you're faced with someone far more challenging than that.

And how you think of Jesus matters because, wherever you're at in the Christian faith, there's no point having a Jesus who is simply an invention of your mind, or a projection of your own character. Which is why we're looking at some of the things Jesus said that people in his day reacted against, because they give us a clear idea of what he said about himself.

And today, we're looking at this event that Matt read to us from John's gospel, where Jesus does something and then says something that leaves the religious leaders wanting to kill him. Which is hardly the stuff of fluffy lambs.

And we're going to see three things: Jesus's Compassion, Jesus's Power and Jesus's Identity.

Jesus' Compassion
And John describes the scene for us: v2, 'Now there is in Jerusalem by the Sheep Gate a pool, in Aramaic called Bethesda, which has five roofed colonnades. In these lay a multitude of invalids - blind, lame, and paralysed.'

And for years after the Enlightenment and the rise of biblical criticism, John's description was used to dismiss the reliability of the gospels. There was no pool of Bethesda in Jerusalem, and there were no five colonnades, and besides, how could you have five colonnades, which would have meant a five sided pool? No one built five sided pools. So here was slam-dunk proof against the gospels.

Until the pool of Bethesda was discovered, right by the Sheep Gate as John describes it. And it consisted of two pools with four colonnades around the edge and a central colonnade dividing the two.

And it was destroyed by the Romans when they sacked Jerusalem in 70AD. So, far from John's gospel being a work of fiction, only someone who knew Jerusalem from before its destruction, only someone who had been to the pools and knew them, only an eyewitness, could have written this. So, far from John's description here undermining your trust in what he says, it should strengthen it.

But so too should the missing v4. You see, if you have a Bible you'll see that it jumps from v3 to v5, and v4 is a footnote. And that's because v4 doesn't exist in the earliest and best manuscripts. Scribes wrote it in later to try and explain why the sick tried to get in the waters. But our modern Bibles rightly leave it out, because it wasn't in the original.

So, as we look at this, you can know, John was there. And the Bible you have in your hand is as close as it is possible to get to what John actually wrote and you can trust it.

And this pool was a bit like Lourdes in the south of France. The sick and the suffering went there in the hope of healing. But look at Jesus as he goes there too. Because whether it was eating with prostitutes, or touching lepers, or showing grace to a Samaritan woman, or restoring the demonised, Jesus always moved towards the broken.

And in amongst all these sick people he picks out this one man, paralysed for 38 years. And John tells us in v6 that 'when Jesus saw him lying there and knew that he had already been there a long time…' he spoke to him. And then in v14, John tells us that it was Jesus who went and found him afterwards in the temple. So in all their interactions, it's Jesus who moves towards the man. And we don't know how Jesus knew he'd been there a long time, but he knew.

And this morning, in fact any morning, you may be struggling. Well, look at Jesus as he enters the place of the broken and sees and knows this man as an individual. And know, you're not lost in the crowd to him. He sees you and knows you, and everything you're facing.

And it's what Jesus says to him afterwards in the temple that gives a clue why, out of all these people, Jesus picks him. Verse 14, "See you are well! Sin no more, that nothing worse may happen to you."

Now, there's a whole book in the Bible, the book of Job, that tears down the idea that you can make some kind of generalised link between people's suffering and their sin.

And yet, here, it seems there *was* a link between this man's 38 years of paralysis and his sin. And it's not hard to imagine some scenarios. Maybe he fell off his donkey when he was drunk. Maybe he fell off a roof when trying to break in somewhere. Maybe he had a stroke while committing adultery. We don't know. What we do know is that Jesus doesn't heal him because he's more worthy than everyone else. In fact, as one commentator suggests, maybe Jesus heals him because he's the only one there whose sickness *was* linked to his sin; because he was the *least* deserving, the *most* in need of grace. That of everyone there he was more broken by sin and suffering than anyone.

But Jesus doesn't just show him compassion by healing him. He shows him compassion by warning him; by telling him that there is something more important than physical health. That your body can be in great shape; that you can be physically well; you can come out of COVID-19 alive, and yet be in spiritual danger. And Jesus loves him enough to tell him.

So, if you're not yet a Christian, but you're starting to think through the Christian faith, just like Jesus took the initiative here with this man, your interest is probably because God is on your case. Christian or not, if you're becoming increasingly aware of some sin in your life and it's getting uncomfortable, don't dismiss it. Just like Jesus warning this man, it's God's compassion to you, telling you, it's time to deal with it.

But then look what Jesus does.

Jesus' Power

Now, Bethesda, means *House of Outpouring*. And this man experiences an outpouring of Jesus' grace.

But think about him. He's been paralysed for 38 years. That's as long as some of you have been alive. And this paralysis has cast a shadow over his life. It's become who he is.

But you don't have to be *physically* paralysed to know what that feels like, do you. Sometimes emotional scars can cast just as long a shadow over a life, and they leave you emotionally paralysed. Or think of fear. When fear takes a hold it can leave your heart paralysed, robbing you of

joy and freedom and confidence in God. And fear of what others might think of you leaves you paralysed from doing or saying what you know is right.

But you can also be paralysed by spiritual, moral indecision. And you can't enjoy all the blessings that come with commitment to Christ because you can't decide whether you are committed to Christ or not. You're stuck in the mud of a moral no-mans land.

Or you can be paralysed by sin - in a sense like this man. Something in your past or your present casts its shadow over you. Something you've done or do, or something done to you can deaden you emotionally or spiritually.

And this man was paralysed for 38 years. For you it could be 38 months, or 38 weeks or 38 days.

But look what Jesus says to him. Verse 6, "Do you want to be healed?" What kind of a question is that for a man paralysed 38 years? A man whose life has been blighted by sin for 38 years. Whose every day has been marked by suffering for 38 years. 'Do you want to be healed? Do you want, really want your life to be different?'

But it's not so strange is it? Because we can become habituated to sin, or fear, or moral indecision, even to physical suffering. It becomes normal. It becomes who we are. And ask any counsellor or doctor and I suspect they would tell you it's not such a strange question. Self-destructive habits or thought patterns can eat away at a life, but is there a real will for life to be different?

Because if this man is healed his whole life will change! If he's healed he may lose his income. He may lose the attention of well-meaning people. It may mean him facing up for the first time to why this happened. Healing for him may mean repentance and an admission of all that's wrong.

And so whatever our paralysis, or simply lack of growth, Jesus' question resonates: Do I want to change? Do I want to come out of this spiritual torpor, this moral paralysis? Do I want to address some of these issues in my personality? Do I want to look my sin or fear in the face?

So Jesus is powerful to diagnose the problems under our problems.

But he's also powerful to heal. Powerful to reverse the years that sin and suffering have taken. Verses 8-9: 'Jesus said to him, "Get up, take up your bed, and walk." And at once the man was healed, and he took up his bed and walked.' Invalided out of life for 38 years, and with a word, Jesus heals him.

Who has that kind of power? Well, read on in chapter 5 and Jesus says his word has even greater power. In verse 24 he says, "Whoever hears *my word* and believes him who sent me has eternal life." Then in v25 he says, "An hour is coming, and is now here, when the dead will *hear the voice of the Son of God*, and those who hear will live."

So who has the kind of power that heals with a word? And who would claim to give life, or raise the dead, with a word?

Jesus' Identity

Now, countries like Saudi Arabia have the religious police, who patrol the streets looking for any infringement of religious law. And in v9 we read those ominous words, 'Now that day was the

Sabbath.' And the religious police are on the streets of Jerusalem, with their list of those 39 different types of work banned on the Sabbath. And they see the man walking, carrying his bed mat.

Verse 10, "It is the Sabbath, and it is not lawful for you to take up your bed." Now the Sabbath commandment in the Ten Commandments was to stop you doing your usual work on the Sabbath. So if this man was a furniture removal man, or if he was a mattress salesman, then fair cop. But he's not! He's been paralysed for 38 years and he's carrying his mat home, he's not breaking the Sabbath. But they have their little list, and on that list is 'carrying things'.

But, when he tells them that someone *told* him to do it, their alarm bells start ringing, and they start fingering their handcuffs, because someone going around *telling* people to break the law is far worse than someone who just does it.

But remember, these guys were not flakey liberals or close-minded materialists. They believed in the supernatural. They believed in angels and demons, in the resurrection of the dead. They loved the Bible and they wanted God honoured in the land. And yet, they can't see that God has poured out his grace on this man. They can't see his legs made strong. All they can see is the mat he's carrying.

But when you think that life, and relationship with God, is about you matching up to a standard, you're always going to have a hard time seeing, and experiencing, and giving grace, aren't you? Or the joy that comes with grace.

So when they find out it was Jesus who told him to carry his mat, John tells us, v16, they persecuted him.

But notice how Jesus responds. Because he doesn't try and argue with them that healing a man or carrying a mat doesn't break the Sabbath. He says, v17, "My Father is working until now, and I am working." And John tells us that in response, v18, 'the Jews were seeking all the more to kill him.' So what were they hearing when he said this? Because to want to kill someone for that sounds kind of extreme to us, doesn't it?

Well, the rabbis agreed that when God rested on the first Sabbath at creation he rested from his work of creation. But forever since he has *always* been working, because he's always upholding the universe and always working through providence. And they agreed that God was the only one who could work on the Sabbath without sinning, because if the whole universe is his, he can never leave home to go to work. He could never lift anything heavy, because nothing was heavy to him. He could never tire himself out because his energy is endless. So the only person who could work on and not break the Sabbath was God.

And Jesus says, 'Exactly!' My Father works and so do I. God cannot break the sabbath because all the universe is his. And all the universe is mine. God upholds everything by his power, even on the Sabbath, and so do I. God pours out his grace and mercy on the Sabbath, and so do I.

Now, when someone says that they can do what only God can do, what are they saying? It's not lost on his hearers, is it? Verse 18, 'This was why the Jews were seeking all the more to kill him, because not only was he breaking the Sabbath, but he was even calling God his own Father, making himself equal with God.'

And yet, rather than blink, Jesus doubles down. In v19 he says that he only ever does what God the Father does, and "*whatever* the Father does", Jesus does. His will, his motives, his actions, are identical to God's.

Then in v20 he says that God the Father loves him "and shows him all that he himself is doing." That not only is he identical with God, he has an inside line to God.

And if that wasn't enough, in v21-22 Jesus claims stuff for himself that his Jewish hearers knew only God could do. The rabbis talked of three keys that God held and gave to no one else: the key to the rain; the key to the womb; and the key to the resurrection of the dead. Only God could send rain, or open the womb, or raise the dead. And Jesus says v21: "For as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, so also the Son gives life to whom he will." 'I hold that key.'

In Genesis 18, Abraham, father of the nation, calls God 'The judge of all the earth.' And in v22 Jesus says, "The Father… has given all judgment to the Son." Just think about that. Jesus is saying he is going to judge every person who has ever lived. That he can weigh every motive, every mitigating or compounding factor; every thought, every word, every deed ever done, or not done. 'I will weigh them all for every person in every age. I am the judge of all the earth.'

And he says the reason God the Father has entrusted him with the judgement is, v23, "that all may honour the Son, just as they honour the Father." That at the last judgement everyone will stand before him and either bow in worship or in fear. But whichever it is they will give him the honour due to God alone. And then, in v24, he says that he is the source of eternal life and salvation from judgement.

Now, do you see why they thought he was making himself equal with God? Because he was.

And to bring it home, he tells them, v39, "You search the scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness about me, yet you refuse to come to me that you may have life." So, it wasn't just that they couldn't see the man's healed body for his mat. It was that they studied the Bible but couldn't see it was all about Jesus.

But before you go 'tut, tut, how terrible' think what Jesus is saying. All these centuries of revelation: Moses and Samuel; David and the psalmists; Solomon and all the wisdom literature; Isaiah and Jeremiah and Ezekiel and Daniel and all the minor prophets; Nehemiah and Ezra - all of them were pointing to him.

So, is Jesus a fluffy lamb? Or maybe an inspiring teacher whose example you should follow?

A man who says these sorts of thing is either someone you should dismiss as a crank, or kneel before and give your life for. The one thing you can't do is stay stuck in the paralysis of no-man's land.

But how do you decide which it is? Dismiss him or worship him? By the fact that no one with delusions of grandeur would be crucified for you. No one with delusions of grandeur would sacrifice himself for the sins that paralyse you. By the fact that the one with such power made himself nothing for you. And by the fact that three days later he rose again.

So, let the truth of who he is sink in. And like this paralysed man, hear his voice speaking to you. Let him heal you of the paralysis of fear: he is filled with compassion for you, he knows you and you are safe in his hands. Let him heal you of the paralysis of sin, trust him that what he wants for you is better. Let him heal you of the paralysis of indecision, look at who he is, look at him dying and rising for you, and then give him your all.

But maybe you feel like one of those Jesus left unhealed at the pool; and you have prayed and hoped and nothing has changed. Well, all of us, look at him. He knows you, he loves you, he has suffered for you. He knows what he is doing in your life and you can trust him with your life. However long this goes on.