Forgiver of Sins
Mark 2:1-12

Imagine you met up with a friend from church and the pastor comes up in conversation. And your friend says, 'well, I like to think of Martin as a 6 foot 5 inch, olive skinned Italian body-builder, fluent in 5 languages, with a PhD in 12th Century Mongolian literature, and a mop of black hair. That'd be really weird, wouldn't it? Because that's not even close, and your friend doesn't really get to choose. So, imagine you're sat having coffee with another friend, and your friend says, 'well, I like to think of God as being like…'.

But the point is that just as there is a real me, or you, so there is a real God, and we simply don't get to imagine him the way we want. Which is why we've been looking at these controversial moments in Jesus' life, because they tell us something of who *he* was saying he was.

And today's our last one, and we're going to look at this event from Mark's gospel. It starts out as this heart-warming story of the loyalty of friends, but rapidly becomes a confrontation over who Jesus claims to be.

We're going to look at three things: What the friends were looking for; what Jesus sees; and what the religious leaders see and don't see.

What The Friends Were Looking For
The house was packed. You couldn't even get in the door. The normal, every day people of Capernaum were there, but so too were the religious leaders. And Mark says, v2, 'Jesus was preaching the word to them.'

But as everyone's listening to him, they start hearing noises. And it's distracting. It's not a baby crying in the creche, or even a hum from the PA system. It seems to be coming from the roof. And it sounds like people are up there. And the crowd are trying to concentrate on Jesus' preaching, but dust starts falling and it's getting harder to pay attention.

You see, there's a man in Capernaum who's paralysed. But despite his body being wrecked he has four good friends. And they've heard enough about Jesus to know that if they can just get their friend to him, Jesus will heal him, and make his body right again. And so they carry him on this mat, probably by the four corners, to the house where the meeting's happening. But when they turn the corner and see the crowd spilling out the door, they realise they should have left way sooner. And they try and squeeze through the crowd, but you know what you do when someone tries to jump the queue at a ski-lift… and you block them. Well, that's what they do: 'you're not coming in here mate'. And Mark says, v4, 'They could not get near Jesus because of the crowd.'

And the crowd can have a similar impact today, can't it? The crowd at school, the crowd on campus, the crowd at work, the crowd of entertainment or media voices that shape your world view. The don't block you physically, but they negatively influence you, hindering you getting to Jesus, or growing in your knowledge of him, or likeness to him, or even wanting to.

But these four friends were willing to do whatever it took to get their friend to Jesus. And they weren't going to be put off by opposition or obstacles, even if that was a roof.

And their roofs were flat, with wooden beams and thatch laid over them, and then a thick layer of dried mud on top. And there was an outside staircase for access. And people would work up there and sleep up there. So this is a solid structure. But these friends are prepared to demolish a solid structure to get their friend to Jesus.

So, back inside, Jesus is preaching, and first there's the sound of footsteps up there. Then the dirt starts falling. Just a little to start with. But then the falling dirt gets more. And now, clumps of mud and thatch are coming down. And Jesus is still preaching, but you know, it is hugely encouraging to a preacher to know that not even Jesus could always keep people's attention. Because now hands start appearing up there, and then daylight, and the hands are tearing more and more off the roof. And at some point Jesus has stopped preaching. And you've got to hope the homeowner was insured, because within minutes there is this great gaping hole.

And then something is dragged across the hole. And it's a man, on a mat. And he's coming down, lowered right in front of Jesus. And when he lands, these four smiling faces peer over the edge. Mission accomplished.

Now, what were those four friends, and what was the man on the mat, expecting to happen next? That Jesus will look at him and say: 'be healed!'

But he doesn't. Jesus has a paralysed man lying in front of him, and he says, v5, "Son, your sins are forgiven." And you think, 'That's really nice, Jesus, and we get that the spiritual side of life matters. And the doctors and medical students amongst us know we have to pursue a holistic approach to health care. But sin and forgiveness aren't the issue here, Jesus; what he needs is physical healing. He needs his body put right.'

That's what his friends think, isn't it? It's what the man thinks. If this was you on the mat it's what you would think. That it's the physical problem that's the most pressing. It's our circumstances that are most important. It's my job situation, or my lack of a partner, or how this person treated me. It's my arms and legs that don't move. And we tend to think '*this* is what you need to deal with, God.'

But Jesus goes deeper. Jesus goes to the problem under the problem. Because this man's ultimate problem is not his sickness or his suffering. It's not his circumstances or his situation. It's his sin.

Now, we aren't given enough details to know if there's some specific sin in this man's life that led to him getting paralysed; what we do know is that Jesus thinks there is something more important, something more pressing than the physical problem, and that is for him to be made right with God.

You see, one after another of our problems could be fixed, but until we turn from living life with no reference to God, our ultimate problem will never be fixed. Because at the root of all our unhappiness, all our discontent, at the root of all disease and death is our disconnect from God.

And so Jesus knows that, regardless of what his friends want for him, what this man most needs is forgiveness. For his separation from God, his guilt, to be dealt with.

But today, our culture rejects any idea of guilt, doesn't it. It's quick to say that those on the other side of the political divide are guilty, but you shouldn't let anyone make *you* feel guilty. Because in

an age of moral relativism, where you can decide for yourself what's right and wrong for you, no one else can say you're guilty. Having a high self-esteem is what you need. Not guilt.

And yet, we have this inescapable sense that we *are* guilty, that we're not good enough. I remember when I became one of the lead doctors on the neonatal intensive care unit at my hospital. And despite in many ways reaching the top, I had this gnawing feeling that I was just waiting to be found out, that I was a fraud. And I sat down one day with one of my older, wiser colleagues and I said, 'Liz, I feel like I'm just waiting to be found out, that I've never been to medical school.' And Liz said, 'O don't worry, we all feel like that!' And psychologists even have a name for it, don't they: Imposters Syndrome.

But that feeling that you don't make the grade, that you're a fraud, that you're waiting to be found out, that you're guilty of something, lurks there. Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, author of the Sherlock Holmes books, once sent an anonymous letter to a number of public figures, and all it said was 'Flee! All is discovered.' And they all fled. Why? Because somewhere, deep down, they felt guilty, that they'd been found out.

And we can't shake that feeling that. Even if we can't say exactly why, even if we can't put our finger on the crime, or the sin, we have this sense that we're guilty.

And the Bible tells us that we feel guilty, because we are guilty. Because we live our lives without reference to the God who made us. And that God is our judge.

Now, if you're not yet a Christian you might think, 'The idea that God is going to judge us, and hold us accountable, is just primitive. We're the judge of our own lives.'

But think what happens when we lose that sense of accountability to the divine judge, when you become your own lawmaker.

I read an article this week by the historian, Sir Anthony Beevor, on the fall of eastern Germany and Berlin to the Red Army in the last days of the Second World War; and the millions of women brutally gang raped by the advancing Soviet forces. And he ends the article by saying, 'The events of 1945 reveal how thin the veneer of civilisation can be when there is little fear of retribution.'

Take away the threat of judgment, of retribution, take away the idea of guilt and you can do what ever you want. But it's not love and harmony that will flourish - it's barbarism and injustice.

So we need a just judge. But if there is a judge, we also, desperately need forgiveness.

But we also need forgiveness if we're to forgive. You see, if you think you don't need forgiveness for yourself, you're going to be proud. And then, you'll hold things against others, because how could they treat you like that?, and that will make you bitter and angry. You won't be humble enough to forgive, because you don't realise you too need forgiveness. Or, if you don't know you're forgiven, you'll be crushed by your guilt, and you'll be needy, never having the spiritual resources to forgive. So if you don't realise you need forgiveness, and can receive forgiveness, you'll either be proud, or bitter, or emotionally stunted. None of which you want to be.

I've used this illustration before, but remember in Shakespeare's Macbeth, after Macbeth has murdered Banquo and is consumed by guilt? Macbeth says, 'Will all great Neptune's ocean wash this blood clean from my hand?' And Lady Macbeth, pacing her room at night, with her servant and doctor watching, is wracked by the guilt of murder; knowing that, despite repeated washing, her hands are covered in blood: 'Out damned spot, out I say… Will these hands ne'er be clean?.. All the perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten this little hand. Oh, Oh, Oh!' And as he watches, the doctor turns to the servant woman and says, 'More needs she the divine than the physician. God, God forgive us all.'

Who can wash their hands clean? Who can cleanse the stain of sin? Buddhism and Hinduism can't. All they offer is endless cycles of reincarnation. Islam can't. All it can offer is a list of things to do in the hope that you can somehow save yourself. Our secular culture can't. In fact, it says you shouldn't feel guilt in the first place, and what help is that when you know you're guilty? It just makes you feel more guilty!

These four faithful friends were looking for physical healing. But in the words of Lady Macbeth's doctor, the man on the mat, and all of us, need more than a physician. We need more than our physical problems sorting. We need the divine. We need forgiveness. We need someone who can cleanse the stain of guilt. Who sees beyond what we think we need to the real issue of our hearts.

What Christ Could See

And twice Mark tells us here that Jesus looked into people's hearts. As the faces of these four men smile through the demolished roof, Mark tells us, v5, 'When Jesus *saw their faith*, he said to the paralytic, "Son, your sins are forgiven."

So, what they thought their friend most needed may have been off target, but Jesus sees their faith and responds to it.

We all need friends like that, don't we? Friends who carry each other to Jesus. You may do that by praying for your friend; you may do it by encouraging them, or giving them counsel. In our brokenness we need friends like these friends. Friends for whom no barrier is tall enough, no obstacles great enough, no roof thick enough to stop them bringing us to Jesus. And we can be those friends. Friends who persevere, who don't quit - even when there's heavy lifting and digging to be done. And our praying may be off target, our words may seem inadequate, our counsel may be less than skilled. But Jesus sees that kind of persistent faith, that I'm-not-quitting-on-you, what-you-need-is-Jesus attitude, and he responds to it.

And look how he responds to the man: '*Son*, your sins are forgiven.' Here is a broken man, lying in front of a crowd eager for a show. And Jesus doesn't play to the crowd. He's tender with him. 'Son' it's a term of endearment, even affection. Remember how when he healed Jairus' daughter, and he said 'Talitha cumi' - 'poppet, honey, sweetie, it's time to get up'? Well here he does it with this man: 'Son', like a father to his child 'I forgive you.'

He's the one you need. He's the one who can see into your heart to what you really need.

But it's not just these friends' faith that he sees is it? He also sees into the hearts of the religious leaders.

What the Leaders See and Don't See

And the scribes hear Jesus tell the man, 'your sins are forgiven' and Mark tells us, v6-7, that they start 'questioning in their hearts, "why does this man speak like that? He is blaspheming! Who can forgive sins but God alone?"' You see, they get what Jesus is saying. And it's not, 'God has forgiven you', it's 'I forgive you'.

On Monday I had a near miss in a car-park in Geneva. I was late for a meeting, I was in a hurry and I tried getting into a parking space that was way too small, and it nearly ended in me running my car against another one. It didn't, but it was close. But imagine I had. Imagine I'd left this other car caved in on one side. And as I was extracting myself, imagine the owner of that car and a totally unconnected bystander turning up. What would the owner think if that bystander said to me 'it's ok, I forgive you, don't worry about the cost, it's forgiven.' The owner would say, 'hang on a minute, you can't say it's ok, that he's forgiven, that there's nothing to pay, that's my car.'

You see, only the person sinned against can forgive the sin. And the scribes know that ultimately, all sin is against God. And yet here is Jesus saying, I forgive you your sin. And they see what he's claiming: that this man's sin, your sin, my sin, is against him, that's it's his to forgive. That he has the authority to do what only God can do. And if Jesus isn't God, that is blasphemy.

But Jesus can see into their hearts, just as he sees into ours, and he knows what they're thinking and he says to them, v8-9, "Why do you question these things in your hearts? Which is easier, to say to the paralytic, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Rise, take up your bed and walk'?"

So which is easier? It's much easier to say 'your sins are forgiven', isn't it, because you can just say it, and no one really knows if they are or not, so no one really knows if you're a fraud or not. But to say 'get up, you're healed' everyone will know whether that's happened or not, because either this guy walks out, or his friends are going to have to absail down and carry him out.

And so Jesus is saying, I will prove to you that I have authority to forgive sins, the seemingly easier thing to say, by doing the harder one and healing him. And he says to him, v11, "Rise, pick up your bed, and go home." And the man stands up, picks up his mat, and walks out in front of them all.

Who can forgive sins but God alone? By the end we've got the answer, haven't we: Jesus. He can do what only God can do, because he's the one that all our sin is against.

But here's the thing, while it may be easier to *say* your sins are forgiven, it's far harder, it's infinitely more costly to do. Because it will cost Jesus his life.

In Exodus 34, when God reveals himself to Moses, and proclaims his name, his character, before him, God says, "The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, *forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin*, but who will by *no means* clear the guilty." But how can God both forgive sin *and* not clear the guilty? How can he be both forgiving *and* just? How can God be God - and give us what we most need, forgiveness, while upholding justice, that sin really does matter?

By God himself taking our sin upon himself and paying the price for it. And at the cross, Jesus did the infinitely harder thing and bore this paralysed man's sin, and your sin, and my sin, and he was counted guilty for us, and he bore the wrath of God we deserve, and died for it.

Which is harder to say, your sins are forgiven, or rise up and walk? If this man is to leave that house with his body made whole, Jesus' body must be broken. If this man is to be raised up, Jesus must go down. If he is to leave forgiven, Jesus must be cursed. And at the cross he was broken, and he did go down to the lowest point, and he was cursed, as he bore all our sin, all our guilt at the place where the forgiveness and the justice of God meet.

Who can forgive sins but God alone? In Jesus that forgiveness comes to us. And all the joy and freedom and relief that comes with it. So, if you feel weighed down by guilt; if you feel the burden of condemnation, if you feel broken in body or soul. Trust him. He knows what you need and he has done the infinitely harder thing for you.