Christ the Giver of Life
John 4:43-54

We're looking at John's gospel and when you get to the end of the book, John tells us why he's writing it and, in particular, why he's included the miracles he has, like the one in today's passage: 'these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name' (John 20:31).

Real life - the kind of life that changes your heart, and satisfies your soul, and never ends. And in today's passage we see a man coming to Jesus for just that: for life. Life for his son. Except, what he's after is physical life. And yet, in coming, he gets more than he bargained for. And in doing so he teaches us a lesson: Firstly, that in your desire for life there's a wrong way to approach Jesus, secondly, there's a right way, and thirdly, the tells us why you should come to him for life at all.

The Wrong Way to approach Jesus
If you remember from last week, Jesus is in Samaria. And in v40 John tells us that the Samaritans, 'Asked him to stay with them, and he stayed there two days.' But then John writes, v43-44: 'After the two days he departed for Galilee. (For Jesus himself had testified that a prophet has no honour in his hometown.)'

Now recently, Su and I went to see the exhibition in Martigny of Albert Anker, the 19th Century Swiss master. And on one of the walls above his paintings are some of his words from a letter to a friend, describing how he felt when he returned to his home area of Switzerland after a long time away. And Anker wrote, 'I could have knelt down and kissed the ground.' Why? Because, he says, he'd come home.

But what caught my eye was the word Anker used for home - *patri*. It's the same word Jesus uses for a prophet having no honour in his hometown, in his πατρις. And if a little corner of Switzerland was Anker's patri, for Jesus it was Galilee.

And yet, it's to Galilee, to home, that Jesus heads. But why do that if what he says is true? I mean, when Anker came home he was as loved by his *patri* as he loved it. But when Jesus comes home, he says, he will have no honour. So why go there? Why not stay in Samaria instead, where people clearly do want him?

I mean, imagine you're a Somebody. And you get invited to address two events happening at the same time, so you've got to choose. And at one, everyone thinks you're wonderful, and they can't wait to hear you speak, and they're going to laugh at every joke, and applaud at every rousing statement, and at the end give you a generous honorarium. They're going to treat you with honour. But at the other, the room is going to be full of your harshest critics. And they won't listen or laugh. In fact, they'll interrupt you, talk over you, and walk out on you, and don't even *think* of an honorarium.

Which invitation would you accept? The one where honour's waiting for you, or the one where there's none?

Yet, Jesus heads to the second. He leaves the place where he's wanted and goes where the welcome will be cold.

What's that got to do with you? Well, maybe you're not yet a Christian, or maybe you are, but either way, you're keeping Christ at arm's length. For whatever reason, at best you're reserved and wary,

and don't want him coming too close or probing too deep. At worst, you're cold, cagy, and suspicious. But what John wants you to see is that Jesus is walking towards you, he's heading your way. He goes to places and people that don't honour him.

But then look at v45, 'So when he came to Galilee, *the Galileans welcomed him*.' So what was all that about?! I thought we were going to have a scene! Jesus says a prophet has no honour back home, and he heads home, and they're going to dishonour him. But… they welcome him! So all's well that ends well.

Except, there are welcomes and there are welcomes. Verse 45, they welcome him 'having seen all that he had done in Jerusalem.' And when the man comes to Jesus, and we'll come to him in a moment, Jesus replies in the plural, v48, "Unless you [you people, you Galileans] see signs and wonders you [again plural] will not believe."

So, as more than one commentator points out, there is a hint of irony in John telling us they welcomed him. Because this isn't love for a homecoming son. This is a performance based assessment. This is a welcome dependent and expectant on Jesus doing the same kind of miracles *for them* that they'd seen him do for others. It's a prove-yourself welcome. It's a thank-you-for-coming-Jesus, now-we'd-like-you-to-do-something-to-impress-us kind of welcome.

And what if he doesn't? Last week in our home group we were talking about why some people turn away from faith. And one reason given was unanswered prayer. That this person has really, really wanted God to intervene and do something for them, and he hasn't. And disappointment becomes resentment which becomes rejection.

Now, sure, that's not the reason everyone turns their back on Christ. But it's one reason, isn't it? And the problem is that like these Galileans, we can welcome Jesus provided he comes on our terms, and performs the way we want him to. Provided he gives us what we want, when we want it. And if he fails, the welcome becomes less warm and our hearts can grow cold towards him.

In his letter to the church at Corinth, Paul says, 'Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified' (1 Cor 1:22-23). And whether it's impressive intellectual arguments you want, or signs and wonders, the danger is you want God to dance to your tune.

But Jesus refuses to do that.

Look at v46-47, 'At Capernaum there was an official whose son was ill. When this man heard that Jesus had come from Judea to Galilee, he went to him.' And when John calls him an official, he uses a title for a royal official. So this man is a member of the social elite. And he comes to Jesus, v47, 'and asked him to come down and heal his son, for he was at the point of death.'

Was Jesus his last hope? Has he tried everything else to save his son, and when he hears that Jesus has come, he comes? Whether last or not, think what coming to Jesus would have meant for him. Because he's a member of the cultural elite, and Jesus is anything but. This man wines and dines with royalty. But Jesus is a carpenter turned preacher, of dubious parentage - a low born no-body. A prophet without honour.

And so to come to Jesus is to humble himself, isn't it? And he does it because he loves his son more than he loves his dignity. And the fear of losing his son is greater than the fear of losing his reputation. You know, someone once told me that people won't take the steps they need to take to change, until the pain of staying the same outweighs the pain of changing. And this man is staring life and death in the face, and he knows that Jesus could make the difference. And he wants that change. So he humbles himself, and comes.

And maybe, like him, your heart is hurting. Or you're facing something you wished you'd never have to face, or that seems way to big for you, or the pain of staying the same is growing. Well, John puts this story here to encourage you to humble yourself, and bring that need to Christ?

You see, to pray is to realise you need help. To pray is to realise there is someone more powerful, more able than you who *can* help. And to pray is to put your hope in him and not yourself.

You see, one of the things this man teaches us is, don't waste your hurts. Don't waste your needs, or your deepest desires that you fear never being met. Because you may be in danger of keeping Jesus at arm's length, but don't allow that to morph into hardness or cynicism. Instead, as he comes to you, take those things to him.

And yet, the truth is, that while this man has humbled himself to come, he probably hasn't humbled himself as much as he thinks. And he asks Jesus to heal his son, but in response, Jesus critiques the people's desire for miracles. And it's hard to avoid the implication that Jesus sees this man as an example of the wider problem. That people won't believe unless they see signs and wonders.

How does the father respond? Verse 49, 'The official said to him, "Sir, come down before my child dies."' He's not in the mood for theological arguments is he? He just wants Jesus to come.

But that's the point, isn't it? You see, he's asking Jesus to do two things: to come with him to Capernaum, to his house, and to heal his son.

Nothing wrong with that, you might say. Except, in Matthew's gospel we meet another official from Capernaum, whose servant is also sick and whose life is in danger. But that official wasn't a royal one, he was a centurion. A member of the Roman occupying forces and a gentile. And when he comes to Jesus to ask him to heal the one he cares about he doesn't get rebuffed with a 'you people won't believe unless you see miracles', he has Jesus say to him, 'sure, I'll come now.' At which point the Centurion goes, 'no, *I am not worthy* to have you enter my house. Just say the word and he'll be healed.' He knows he deserves nothing from Jesus.

But this royal official isn't thinking like that, is he? Because he's a royal official. And he's used to people doing what he tells them to do, and so even in his need, even as he swallows his pride and comes to Jesus, he's still thinking that he dictates the terms.

Think how we could be like that. Maybe you're not yet a Christian. Could you be holding out until God gives you the proof or the answers you're looking for? And in a sense you're telling God what he must do. Or if you are a Christian, is there some area of your life that you're refusing to submit to Christ, because you want to retain right of ownership, the right of direction?

And so we can think we have humbled ourselves, only to discover, we're still coming on our terms.

So, does Jesus give the man what he wants? Does he go with him and heal his son,? And the answer is, no… and yes!

The Right Way
Look at v50, 'Jesus said to him, "Go; your son will live."' So, Jesus *will* heal his son, but he won't go with him. And where does that leave the man? At a point of decision. You see, the only way he can turn around and walk away, and begin his journey back to Capernaum alone, is if he really believes Jesus can do this. Otherwise, he's got to stay and plead.

And if Jesus *had* gone with him, the man might have thought that it was through his social status, his elevated position, that his son was healed, because he's the kind of dad who can pay for the best health care, or at least get the best healer to come.

But in saying - go, your son will live - Jesus has brought him to the point of decision. Is he going to *truly* humble himself and believe Jesus can do this, and do it just by speaking the word, and so come to realise he is not worthy of having Jesus in his house? Or is he going to carry on living as before, trusting in his own ability to fix things, in self-reliance?

It's the decision, who is more to be trusted, him or Christ? Whose hands is his son's life in - his or Christ's? If he turns around and heads home, is all lost, or are his deepest desires about to come true?

But in bringing him to this point, Jesus is doing something else as well, isn't he? He's giving him the chance to separate himself from his countrymen. Because if he turns around and leaves, he has no signs or wonders or any other evidence to go on. The only thing he has to go on, the only sign, the only wonder he has, is Christ himself.

And we're all in that position. That may be coming to faith in Christ for the first time, and repenting of your sin, and putting your trust in him. It may be in staying in the faith when your friends are leaving. It may be persevering in the faith when life is hard. It may be living out the faith, and submitting yourself in obedience to his word, when you'd rather he submitted to you. In being generous when you'd rather have more to spend; in serving, when you'd rather take; in staying in a friendship or marriage when it seems easier to leave. The only evidence you have to go on, is Christ and his word. But just like Jesus uses this man's heartache to bring him to the point of decision, so God will often use hardship to bring us to that same point: am I going to trust Jesus, and his word, or carry on trusting myself?

So, how does this father respond? Verses 50-51, 'The man believed the word that Jesus spoke to him and went his way. As he was going down, his servants met him and told him that his son was recovering.'

So he takes Jesus at his word and, as he does, life and blessing come.

Does that mean that if we just trust and obey everything will be ok and we'll get what we're praying for? No. As the puritan pastor John James wrote, 'If the good thing we desire is good for us, we shall have it. If it is not good, then the not having is good for us.' In other words, we can ask Jesus and still get a 'no'. But it will be the 'no' of love. And that's when we have to trust him.

So how and why can you do that?

[The wrong way to approach him; the right way to approach him; and…

Why you can and should approach him and trust him
So the servants meet him, tell him his son is getting better, he asks them when, and v53, 'The father knew that this was the hour when Jesus had said to him, "Your son will live." *And he himself believed, and all his household.'*

Now, we're all going to build our lives on something, aren't we? We're all going to put our trust in something or other as the way to be happy and give us the life we want.

And by writing this gospel, John's trying to help us to see that the life we're looking for - that soul-satisfying, heart-changing, supremely fulfilling and never-ending life, can only be found in Jesus, and in trusting him - like this man and his household.

And if you're not yet a Christian, but you're thinking about it, one of the things that might be putting you off is 'what will my friends and family think?' Well, again, there are no promises here, but look at this man's household. The reason they are also coming to faith in Jesus is because they see the impact of Christ on this man's, and his son's, lives. So trust Christ, and trust him that your family and friends are safe in his hands.

But for the rest of us, look how John finishes: v54, 'This was now the second sign that Jesus did when he had come from Judea to Galilee.' - The first was changing the water into wine at the wedding feast. But in raising that, he's wanting you to compare these two miracles.

Because they both happen in Cana. And they both happen in response to a need communicated to Jesus. At the wedding it's for wine, and the request is brought by his own mother. Here it's for life, and it's brought by a father. And in both the request is initially rebuffed. And so in both the one asking responds with trust: Mary - 'do whatever he tells you'; here, the father - turning, leaving and taking Jesus at his word. And in both the need is met. And in both the result is faith: at the wedding John tells us, 'His disciples believed in him' (2:11) and here, 'he himself [the father] believed.'

But if, as we saw, the first sign, at the wedding, was telling us that Jesus is fulfilling all the Old Testament laws of purification, and that he's the ultimate bridegroom come for his bride, what's this second sign telling us?

Well, look at the characters involved. A royal father, and a son at the point of death, who recovers. And look when it happens. Back in chapter two, we're told the wedding at Cana took place 'on the third day' (2:1). And here, in v43, we're told that Jesus headed back to Galilee after two days. Which means this healing - this life snatched from the jaws of death - also happens on the third day.

And that's why you can humble yourself, like this man, and separate yourself from a hard and cynical world. That's why you can trust Christ and obey him. Because if this man is coming *for* his son, he's coming to Jesus *the* Son. *The* Son of *the* royal Father. And if this man's son was beloved, how much more loved is Jesus by his Father.

And this boy is at the point of death. But when *the* Son of the Father comes to that point, when he is praying in the garden on the night of his betrayal, 'Father, take this cup from me,' his Father does not intervene to save him. Instead, he is left to face death. And, at the cross, he enters death itself. And not because of sickness, but for sin. For all those times when we've not trusted or obeyed. For all those times we have held Jesus at arm's length, or rested in our self-sufficiency. Because if Jesus is a prophet without honour, it's because he's the Suffering Servant Isaiah said would come, 'He was despised and rejected by men… but he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities;… and with his wounds we are healed' (Is 53:3, 5).

Because it's in his death that death itself dies. You see, if this man's son was brought back from the point of death on the third day, on *the* third day Christ was literally brought back from the dead. And that means he really is the difference between life and death, joy and grief - not just for this official, but for all of us.

Because, if he loves you enough to die for you, you can humble yourself, and trust him and obey him. And as you do you will find life and life in all its fullness.