Westlake Church Lausanne

Christ's Power to Heal
Matthew 8:1-1

Have you ever heard someone described as being all mouth and no action, or all talk and no trousers, or all hat and no cattle? They've got all the words, but there's very little in the way of delivery.

Well, back in chapter 4, Matthew wrote, 'And he [Jesus] went throughout all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom and healing every disease and every affliction among the people.' In other words, Jesus wasn't just talk, he was also action. He didn't just proclaim the kingdom, the kingdom of God physically broke in, through him.

And having said that, Matthew gave us a taste of Jesus' *talk* in the Sermon on the Mount. But what follows after the Sermon is the *action*, these three healing miracles we've just read.

Now, depending on where you're at, you might hear the mention of miracles and think, 'Am I really supposed to believe this stuff happened? Aren't we more sophisticated, more rational nowadays than to believe this stuff?'

Well, there are a number of things one can say to that. The first thing I'd say is that even outside the Bible, this was undoubtedly Jesus' reputation. The leading Jewish historian of the time, Josephus, described Jesus as a worker of 'surprising deeds' – so what was going on to make Josephus write that? But secondly, think of who is writing this account. In many ways, Matthew was an arch-materialist. By training and trade Matthew was a tax collector. So here is a guy who was used to hard facts and figures and columns and spreadsheets; a man who dealt in the tangible, in whether things added up or not. In fact, he had risked the hatred of his fellow Jews to pursue that, so committed to the making of money and life in the real here-and-now was he. And yet he's saying, 'yes, and this is what Jesus did.'

And it wasn't just these three cases. Look at the end, v16, 'That evening they brought to him many who were oppressed by demons, and he cast out the spirits with a word and healed all who were sick.' So imagine you had been there that evening, and you went round with pen and paper, and collected all their stories, you would have had enough material to write a book about those whose lives had been physically or emotionally transformed by Jesus.

So the question for you and me is, if that's the case, if Matthew could have chosen any number to tell us about in more detail, why does he choose to highlight these three? Why choose the stories of a leper, a Roman soldier and a woman? What have these three changed lives got to say to us?

In Need of Cleansing
Now, I'm sure you've heard this before, but apparently Jewish men of Jesus' day had a prayer they recited every day. 'Thank you God that I'm not a gentile or a woman.' And so, remarkably, two out of these three healings happen to people –

a gentile Roman army officer, and a woman, who were looked down on as second class citizens, two people who at least 50% of the population thanked God everyday that they weren't.

But if that's true, what about the first healing? You see, if Jewish men daily verbalized the second-class status of Gentiles and women, they didn't need to say anything about how they viewed lepers, did they? They really were the outcasts.

And so in these three cases we see Jesus moving towards the marginalized. We see him pouring out his compassion and his power on the ostracized, on those who everyone else would either look down on, or shun, or exclude, on lepers and gentiles and women.

Let's look first at the man with leprosy. And look at what Leviticus, the book in the Old Testament that deals with this, has to say. Leviticus 13:45-46, "The leprous person who has the disease shall wear torn clothes… and cry out 'Unclean, unclean.' He shall remain unclean as long as he has the disease. He is unclean. He shall live alone. His dwelling shall be outside the camp." So this man who comes to Jesus is not just suffering from a physical condition is he? Sure there was the disease, but what he was facing was way more than skin deep. What went with it was very real physical, emotional and relational isolation.

To maintain public health, and to stop the disease spreading, this man had to live away from everyone else, even his family. That's the physical, and emotional isolation. But on top of that was his ritual, or religious uncleanness. You see, in Leviticus these varying states of unclean, clean and holy were there to teach people that God was dangerously, awesomely holy, and that they weren't. And leprosy rendered this man ritually unclean. So it wasn't just that he couldn't live in normal society, he also couldn't attend the Temple or go to the synagogue, or offer any sacrifices. So he was cut off not just from his fellow people, he was also cut off from God, with no means of access, no means of drawing close to him. His life was one of relational and spiritual isolation. It was a living death sentence.

And so, as he approaches Jesus, just imagine everyone else backing off in fear. Imagine mothers grabbing their children, and men pushing against each other to get back, lest this leper contaminate them. Because the very last thing they want is to join him. They would do anything not to have his life, or be in his place.

So it's no wonder that Matthew says in v2, he 'came to [Jesus] and knelt before him' and asked him to heal him. Except that isn't what he says, is it? What he actually says, v2, is "Lord, if you will, you can make me clean."

If you are willing Jesus, you can do this. You can heal me, Jesus, if you want to. And just think of all the emotional hurt, all the brokenness, all the longing that goes into that statement. Jesus if you want to, you can take all this away. So this man knows that Jesus has the power to heal him, his only question is, does Jesus

want to? It's a crucial question isn't it? Is God good as well as powerful? Is he merciful, as well as mighty? Is Jesus willing, as well as able?

But did you notice,, as well that he doesn't say, 'if you want to, you can *heal* me'? He says, 'if you're willing, you can make me *clean'*. He asks Jesus not to *cure* him, but to *cleanse* him. Because he knows his problem is more than skin deep, that it's much deeper than just the physical – he wants, he needs, not just physical but relational and spiritual wholeness too. He wants to be reconciled to others and to God, just as much as he wants his skin back. He wants to return, he wants this gulf between him and others, and between him and God to be crossed, he wants uncleanness taken away, he wants to become *clean*.

So what does Jesus do? Verse 3, 'And Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him.' Now imagine that you are lost in a desert, and you are so thirsty, more thirsty, more desperate for water than you could ever have imagined possible. And then you're rescued, and someone gives you a glass of water; what must that first gulp taste like? And this man is in a wasteland, a wilderness, a desert of isolation, thirsting and longing for contact. What must that touch of Jesus have felt like? How long had it been since he had last felt the touch of anyone? And Jesus touched him. Jesus was willing to become unclean, to make him clean.

And he didn't even need to – the next healing tells us Jesus' words have the power to heal, so he doesn't need to touch anyone, let alone contaminate himself, he could have just said the words – no touch required. So why did he do it? Because just as surely as Jesus' hand extended towards that man, so too did God's love. God's love for the broken, and the outcast, and the marginalized, and the unclean. And he said, v3, "I will; be clean." And Matthew says, 'Immediately his leprosy was cleansed.' And that man's life was forever transformed.

So why does Matthew tell us his story? Well, firstly it tells us that Christ has come for the broken and the excluded. Secondly, because it tells us of Christ's compassion and power to heal. But there's another reason, isn't there, and that is that in many ways, we're all like this man. He is unclean, and his life trashed by leprosy, and he cannot cleanse himself. And you and I, we're not lepers, and we may not consider our lives to have been trashed, and yet we too can know the pain of relational and spiritual isolation. We don't have leprosy, but sin, our own self-centredness, or self-absorption, or our anger, or those things we just can't get free of, can affect our lives as leprosy affected his. They can damage or destroy our relationships. Just like leprosy, they can eat away at our lives and our inner sense of wellbeing. Like leprosy it spreads. Other areas of our lives, or the lives of those around us, get sucked in and hurt. And worst of all, like leprosy, it leaves us alienated and cut off from God. And just like him, we can not cleanse ourselves. We need someone, some power outside of us, to do it for us.

The question is, how can you access that kind of inner cleansing, healing power?

The Way to Wholeness

If the leper was isolated because of his skin condition, the Roman centurion was alienated by his race. But not just his ethnicity, he's also a member of the occupying forces, he's a symbol of the Jewish people's subjugation under the power of Rome. So here is a man who arguably deserves nothing from Jesus.

And yet, he too approaches Jesus: v5, 'When [Jesus] entered Capernaum, a centurion came forward to him, appealing to him, "Lord, my servant is lying paralyzed at home, suffering terribly."' Now, did you notice that he doesn't actually ask Jesus to do anything? He simply tells him the situation, and the rest he leaves to him. Why? Because this army officer realizes that Jesus, a wandering Jewish rabbi, is his superior; and he calls him, *Lord*.

And when Jesus tells him "I will come and heal him" the centurion immediately says: v8, "Lord, I am not worthy to have you come under my roof." Now just think about that, because this man had every reason to feel entitled to have Jesus do just that. He's a figure of authority. He's got a hundred men under him. He's the one with power and influence in the town. Not only that, but he has the moral advantage – he's not asking this for himself, but for another. The least Jesus could do was come.

But that's not how this gentile soldier sees it, is it? 'I am not worthy'. I don't deserve you to do this. You owe me nothing Lord. And yet often, aren't we tempted to think the opposite, that we think we do deserve God to do something for us? And if you think, 'no not really' just ponder why it is that we get grumpy, or grumble, or complain, when life doesn't work out the way we want, or people don't treat us the way they should. Isn't it because we think we deserve better? And if you think about it, religion feeds on this, doesn't it? If you do enough good, or pray enough, or give enough, you put God in your debt, you make yourself worthy of God doing this for you. But the Christian gospel, and this man's attitude is very different. He knows he's dependent on Jesus' undeserved grace. He's not worthy – his only hope is that Jesus will be gracious to him: v8, "only say the word, and my servant will be healed. For I too am a man under authority."

So it's not just his attitude that's remarkable – it's his faith – a faith that Matthew says in v10, 'When Jesus heard this he marveled.'

You see, he's seen something about Jesus, that Jesus is just like him, a man under authority. He knows that the reason soldiers and servants do what he, their commanding officer, tells them is because he's also under authority. That his authority, as a centurion, is delegated authority, the Emperor's authority. And people obey him because, if they don't, they'll have Rome and the Emperor to contend with.

I was being driven by a friend recently who was stopped for speeding. And literally just before, he had been telling me what he thought about traffic police

and it wasn't very flattering. But the moment that police car started flashing its lights, and that officer approached the car wearing his uniform, and his hat and his badge, my friend became all compliant and contrite: 'yes officer, no officer, I'm very sorry officer.' And in every other way, as society would measure it, in earning power, or social status, or intellectual level, my friend was the policeman's superior. So why was this policeman the one to be obeyed? Because he's a man under authority – he's acting as the representative of the state, of the law.

And this Roman soldier knows that when he speaks it's as if the Emperor speaks. And the incredible thing is he sees the same in Jesus. That when Jesus speaks, God speaks. All Jesus has to do is say the word, and it will happen, because that's what happens when God speaks. So this man has realised something of who Jesus is: that he's come from God, that in some way he's been anointed by God, with the authority of God, to do the work of God.

And Jesus marvels at that faith, v10, "Truly I tell you, with no one in Israel have I found such faith." The very people who should have seen it, the religious leaders, the ones who think they know what's what, and what the Messiah will be like, the ones on the inside, have missed it; but this outsider, this pagan, gentile, has seen it, and believes.

And Jesus says it's that kind of faith, the faith that puts its trust in Jesus and who he is, that opens the way to true and ultimate healing and wholeness, the faith that makes this inner cleansing we all need possible. Because that's what the feast he talks about signifies: the time when everything will be made right. Verse 11, "I tell you, many will come from east and west and recline at table with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven."

So, finding your place at God's banquet is not dependent on your ethnic or racial profile, or on keeping the rules, it's not about whether you're an insider or an outsider. It depends on whether you put your faith in Jesus or not. And Jesus says this gentile soldier is just a foretaste of the multitudes who will do just that. And ironically, it's those who think they're entitled, who think God owes them, who think they have a right, who will be left outside. Verse 11, "while the sons of the kingdom will be thrown into the outer darkness", far from the light of his presence; far from his grace and his blessing – the very things we're all searching for.

And Jesus has come that you might have them, that you might come and join the feast.

But of course, that man's faith in Jesus wasn't just about future wholeness, it also secured it now, for his servant. Verse 13, 'And to the centurion Jesus said, "Go; let it be done for you as you believe." And the servant was healed at that very moment.'

So, if the healing of the man with leprosy tells us that we all need cleansing, and if the centurion tells us that they way to wholeness and healing is through faith in Jesus; what does the third episode tell us?

Willing to Serve
Verse 14, 'And when Jesus entered Peter's home, he saw his mother-in-law lying sick with a fever.' Now this lady wasn't socially isolated like the leper – she's at home with her family. And she's not racially excluded like the gentile centurion, she's Jewish; but she's a woman, and that means, in that culture, she was at best a second-class citizen. And yet, without seemingly even being asked, Jesus heals her: v15, 'he touched her hand, and the fever left her.' Now given that later that night there where many more miracles that sound like they might have been a lot more dramatic, why does Matthew tell us this one that seems so un-dramatic?

And the answer is, because of her response: v15, 'And the fever left her, and she rose and began to serve him.' Now, if any of you have ever suffered the devastating effects of man 'flu, you'll know how remarkable this is. Because with man 'flu recovery takes days, doesn't it, days of lying on the sofa, slowly recovering. But one touch from Jesus and this woman is right back in there serving him.

And Matthew highlights that because it's the grateful response to grace. It's the response when Jesus has intervened in your life, and you know like the centurion that you don't deserve it, and in response you want to give of your time, and effort, and resources to serve him. And for you and me, it's knowing you're on the receiving end of Jesus' grace that can motivate us to acts of sacrificial service and giving, and of carrying other's burdens. And if you think about it, only grace can help you do that. You see, if you're doing something because you think by doing it God will give to you, or people will recognize and reward you and think what a wonderful person you are, you're doing it for selfish reasons – you're at the centre of the act. Or if you do it out of a sense of obligation, it becomes grudging, and you're heart attitude becomes resentful. But when you're doing it in response to Jesus' undeserved grace to you, you can serve God, and carry others' burdens, and do it selflessly and with joy, in gratitude for all that he has done for you.

And in closing this passage Matthew gives a hint of just what it is Jesus has done.

The Burden Carrier
Having described that evening surgery Jesus held, Matthew says, v17, 'This was to fulfill what was spoken by the prophet Isaiah: "he took our illnesses and bore our diseases."'

And that quote comes from Isaiah 53, that 700 years before foretold that the Messiah would come and suffer and die in the place of his people. And to die –

not just for all their sin, but for all sicknesses too, Matthew says. You see, ultimately, all sickness and suffering is caused by sin – not the sin of the individual, but of a creation out of step, and out of kilter, with its creator. And at the cross Jesus takes all that disorder, all that suffering, and all our sin upon himself, that he might reconcile everything to God, and begin the work of the new creation and of putting everything right.

And that's why Jesus wouldn't let the leper go and tell anyone what Jesus had done for him, but to go and show the priest and offer the right sacrifice. Why does he do that? Doesn't he want to build up the Jesus brand, Make Israel Great Again, and spread the message? No. Jesus didn't come to draw a great crowd of sightseers, and he hadn't come to lead a grassroots movement of rebellion against Roman power. And he wasn't driven by self-promotion or the desire for power. He had come to die, he had come to bear our burdens and our illnesses and our diseases and all our uncleanness, that he might bring about the total healing and the putting right of all things that we long for.

So, why, like the leper, should we go to Jesus for the cleansing we need? Why like the gentile soldier, should we put our faith in him and in who he is? Why like Peter's mother in law, should we get up and willingly serve him and carry others' burdens? Because he has born our burdens, and went to the cross for us.