



St. Stephen's Traditional Episcopal Church

11856 Mays Chapel Rd., Timonium, MD 21093

The Nineteenth Sunday in Trinity, October 30th, 2011

✠ In The Name of The Father and of The Son and of The Holy Ghost. *AMEN* ✠

Jesus' healing of the paralyzed man – recounted in today's Gospel – gives proof that our Saviour had a keen, not to say decidedly mischievous, sense of humor. Personally, I prefer St. Mark's account of events to St. Matthew's deadpan report that deals mainly with the theological side of the business – Christ's authority to forgive sins on his own account.

While this is the crucial point of the episode, it is important for our understanding of the nature of God's love for humanity in all its conditions to know something of the people with whom he was dealing. They seem – not to put too fine a point on things – to have been a bunch of well-meaning drunks, or at least guys whose idea of a good time principally ran to wine, women and song. And in that order.

Palsy (meaning paralysis) has long been known to be a consequence of apoplexy or stroke. And apoplexy or strokes have long been known to be a consequence over indulgence in alcohol. The onlookers' disapproval of the stroke victim and Jesus' declaration that his sins were forgiven can be taken as circumstantial evidence that the paralyzed man was something of a drunk.

If you need further evidence, take the guys he hung out with. Mark tells us they couldn't near Jesus for the huge press of people around the house where he was preaching. But instead of struggling to reach the front door as sober folks might be expected to do, they decided to climb on to the roof, burrow through the ceiling and let

their friend down through the hole.

You'd get arrested for doing things like that today. And two thousand years ago, you can bet your bottom dollar, you'd get arrested too. It is the sort of behavior only hooligans and tear-aways get up to – and you can imagine that the owner of the house was less than pleased with what they'd done.

The episode would make a great plot for a Chevy Chase movie or a sketch for Monty Python's Flying Circus. But the account of these ham-fisted drunks going to bizarre lengths to help a friend in trouble isn't the funniest part of this story. This is no one-joke movie. The big laugh comes when Jesus turns the tables on a bunch of sleazy lawyers.

"Scribes" were Pharisee canon lawyers who dogged Jesus' footsteps throughout his Ministry. They weren't ambulance chasers of the sort that file liability suits or workmen's compensation cases. They were prosecutors gathering evidence to file charges of blasphemy against Jesus – a crime that carried the death penalty.

The pandemonium created by the drunks letting their paralyzed drinking buddy through the roof must of have taken the scribes a bit off guard. But Jesus' response to the sight of the sick man restored their spirits in a most satisfactory fashion.

Normally, Jesus would simply have said to the

sick man: "Get up and walk." He might have laid hands on him – or he might not. There is something remarkably casual, off handed even, about the way Jesus performed His miracles. But, for some reason or the other, Jesus didn't follow his usual pattern. Instead, he said: "Son, be of good cheer; thy sins are forgiven thee."

Folks back then believed illness was the punishment for sin. In this case, they were probably right – although it would be more accurate to say the man's paralysis was the consequence of sin rather than punishment for it. Jesus knew this at a glance and offered him comfort with the words: "Be of cheer, thy sins are forgiven thee." The man, after all, had very real sins to forgive. Jesus' words, however, have a much deeper meaning. In making this declaration, Jesus was claiming a prerogative only God possessed – the power to forgive sins. The lawyers were absolutely jubilant. They'd finally gotten what sought for so long – cast iron evidence of blasphemy.

Jesus, of course, knew precisely what they were thinking and baited a trap for them: "Why are you thinking evil in your hearts?" he asked. "What's easier to say: 'Thy sins be forgiven thee;' or: 'Arise, take up thy bed and walk?'"

Both statements, of course, are easier enough to utter. The difficulty lies in the delivery. The scribes knew – just as we, today, know – that both forgiving sins and effecting miracle cures are quite beyond the capabilities of any human beings. Both are solely God's prerogatives.

Jesus then pulled the rug out from under them: "Just to let you know that the Son of man has power on earth to forgive sins: Get up. Pick up your bed and go home." The paralyzed man did just that – leaving the scribes speechless. The 18th Century German Protestant theologian Johann Albrecht Bengel, father of modern scriptural critical studies, observes: "This speech hints at His celestial origin."

Actually, the speech does far more than that. It asserts Jesus' "Celestial origin" quite unambiguously. When Jesus referred to Himself as the Son of man as he did in this passage from the Gospel, he was proclaiming Himself to be the Son of God. And his audience was very well aware of it.

They were all familiar with the Book of Daniel (7:13,14): "Behold, one like the Son of man came with clouds of heaven, and came to the Ancient of days and was given dominion, and glory, and a kingdom, that all people, nations, and languages, should serve him . . ."

In healing the man in this fashion, Jesus was demonstrating to them, and us, that he is the Son of God. In doing so, he deliberately denied us the option of claiming he was simply brilliant man, a highly enlightened teacher, a great human being. His statement leaves us with only two options. Either we fall at his feet and worship him as our God and King; or we turn our backs on him and walk away. We have no alternative, just as those lawyers had no alternative.

The evangelists don't tell us how those particular lawyers responded, but, then, Matthew and Mark weren't concerned with that sort of detail. They simply wanted to point out the implications of Jesus' words and actions: He was not only asserting his own divine authority to pardon sins, but also establishing the principle that the divine power of forgiveness can be committed to man.

Indeed, not long afterwards, Jesus gave this power to human beings when he committed to his Church the authority to grant absolution – to forgive sins. St. John's records in (20:22b-23) his Gospel: "He breathed on them, and saith unto them, Receive ye the Holy Ghost: Whosoever sins ye remit, they are remitted unto them; and whosoever sins ye retain, they are retained."

The healing of the paralyzed man had very special significance for Matthew. As Jesus left the house, he wrote, he saw a man named Matthew, sitting at the receipt of custom: and he saith unto him, follow me. And he arose and followed Him."

In the wake of the miraculous healing, Matthew experienced a miracle of his own that was no less wondrous. Jesus transformed him from a reviled and despised tax collector to a disciple of the Lord and, ultimately, to one of his great evangelists. Amazing to report, it is a transformation that is available to us all. *AMEN*