

Week Three: Jesus in miracle healing sensation

1. Jesus is once again at the centre of controversy. What is it that angered, disturbed or amazed the different onlookers?

When we dig down we find that this isn't an easy question – or at least its implications can lead to further questions in turn. Everyone – onlookers, participants, perhaps even Jesus' own disciples – seem to have been taken outside their comfort zone. Some – described as scribes and Pharisees in the story – seem to have got angry. It was surely Jesus' words to the paralysed man that provoked such anger, rather than the act of healing itself. For by choosing to say 'Friend, your sins are forgiven you' he was claiming the authority to forgive sins that belonged to God alone. This is the first time in Luke's Gospel when such a personal claim is made publicly by Jesus, though the Gospel has previously noted his authority in relation to the 'unclean spirits' (4.36). But with this incident Jesus has in effect crossed a line and travelled a little further along a road that will increasingly anger and disturb those who encounter him and lead ultimately to the Cross. For us, of course, who sit on the 'other side' of Jesus' death and resurrection the problem is not so much what this story tells us about who Jesus is, but the implicit equation that it makes between 'sin' and the man's paralysis. We don't of course know the 'whole picture' – but like its first participants, we too are left with some unresolved questions at its end.

2. What happens in your church that angers, disturbs or amazes onlookers? In what sense is your church today involved in healing – physically, emotionally, spiritually?

A story that speaks to me of healing:

In the village in Kent where we live, a young boy called Ben was a regular part of the congregation. He was in fact the adopted son of the curate. Ben regularly came to the Sunday service when his mother was leading it. Ben had severe autism and other major health problems – and his involvement in the service was often very vocal and physical – outsiders might have said 'disruptive' and been disturbed by it. But the church community loved Ben and his family and Ben was treasured for what he brought to the church and what they learned through his presence with them. Ben died suddenly last week (28 September). The church was packed for his funeral.

As it happens the new vicar was interviewed and appointed last week, two days after Ben's death. The person selected already knew the church community well. One of the reasons that he wanted to consider the role was because of the church's attitude towards Ben. The new priest felt that such a church was a place where healing was happening.

3. In the bible passage, the friends faced obstacles when bringing the paralysed man to Christ. What difficulties do we experience when sharing our understanding of Christ?

There will be a lot of different ways to respond to this question. Personal embarrassment, and our own inadequacies could be one! But perhaps an often-felt obstacle is the fact that the picture many people have of Jesus Christ has been overlaid with the destructive debris of centuries. We can't quite see or share the amazing person that Jesus was because of the way that throughout history Christ has often been misused – he has been turned by some into a weapon of oppression in support of a wide variety of past and present vested interests. Alternatively he has been portrayed as an adult 'gentle Jesus meek and mild' who would not say boo to a goose – and certainly not to religious and political leaders. We need to work away at removing such misinterpretations so that we can properly share with others the compelling and challenging attractiveness of this figure who changed our world.

4. How can we prevent ourselves from becoming desensitised to daily images in the media of poverty and injustice? How can our faith help us in this?

I wrote the following poem/prayer some years ago on a day when I was pondering exactly that question. The editor of a collection where it was later published appropriately called it 'Prayer fatigue'. I wonder if your answer might be similar to the one I give in the poem?

The shouts are too loud
they so often deafen my ears.
War, famine, destruction, death -
the sufferings of the world glide past my soul.
I have heard too much to care.

But then you, O God,
you stand in the midst of the world's woe,
and the shapes of those who suffer are no longer faceless,
for you have bequeathed to them your own face,
their pain is etched with the lines of your passion.
And I shall proclaim:
I had heard, but now I see.

The people are too many,
They blur together in my imagination,
Races, colours, faiths and languages -
their shifting kaleidoscope dazzles my vision

I am made giddy by their infinite variety.

But then you, O God,
you are the still point round which all revolves,
in you both light and shadow find an equilibrium:
you paint into life our many-peopled world,
your love refracts us into a rainbow of hope:
And I shall proclaim:
I had heard but now I see.