



Encounters in Ethics – Healing

Sermon – Kim Thomason

Sunday 19 March 2023

Matthew 20:29-34; 1 Kings 17:17-24; James 5:13-16

Does anyone recall ever watching Geoffrey Robertson's Hypotheticals, which were first broadcast on TV back in the late 1980s? My recollection is of a fast-paced panel discussion on a variety of topics; Geoffrey Robertson would use 'hypothetical' questions to bounce ideas around the room and to get people thinking. He would take a topic - political problems, health matters, human rights issues - and, through the discussion, consider the ramifications of what the questions and the discussions were uncovering. They were highly engaging discussions, often humorous and consistently thought-provoking.

We're going to ask ourselves some questions today. They're going to be based on the Bible passage from Matthew 20, continuing our series on Encounters and Ethics; our topic for consideration is 'Healing'.

How do you feel about 'healing'?

We all come to this topic with a lifetime of experience and varying degrees of health. My gut reaction when I knew I was preaching on this passage was, 'That's an interesting topic! We could open up a can of worms.' That is, in studying this passage where two men are healed, we may find ourselves wrestling with more questions than we answer. But that's okay. This is a safe space where we are learning and growing together and it's when we wrestle with our theology, when we ask God to answer the difficult questions, when we humbly admit that we don't understand, that God gives wisdom to those who ask and the words of Jeremiah 29:13, ring true.

'You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart.'

So, we're not going for easy answers today, nor are we going to settle for platitudes. We're going to see what the Bible says and we're going to base our decisions on the Word of God.

Let's pray.

Heavenly Father, please give us wisdom and understanding as we read your Word today and as we face any challenges that it raises. We acknowledge that you alone are sovereign, our mighty Creator and loving God. We thank you for Jesus and we ask that your Spirit prompt our thinking, soften our hearts and transform our lives as we learn about healing, as we consider the implications for our lives, and as we seek to grow in love and faith together as your people, as your church, here in Kiama / Minnamurra. Amen.

Jesus is travelling to Jerusalem. Matthew's gospel records that Jesus is leaving Jericho, which is still within the borders of Judea; Jerusalem is no more than 25kms away. There's a great crowd; there would have been many pilgrims travelling for the Passover in Jerusalem and quite possibly some of these people joined with Jesus along the way. They are heading in the same direction.

Picture this... A large crowd walking along the road, heading to Jerusalem. At the side of the road, two blind men are sitting together and, whilst they can't see Jesus, they have heard that he's passing by. The individual thoughts and the conversations that are happening are interrupted by their shouting.

"Lord, Son of David, have mercy on us!"

It's a bit rude, isn't it. A bit presumptuous perhaps? Why would anyone want to stop their journey and speak with two insignificant men sitting by the side of the road? The crowd has a destination in mind and a religious festival to attend. These men can't see the crowd, but they can hear them. They've heard that Jesus is going by so why are they shouting out and drawing attention to themselves? It's not behaviour

that is really socially acceptable. And we know that because the crowd rebukes them and tells them to be quiet.

I do appreciate the irony here and I'm glad that Matthew has recorded this event. The men have shouted out for mercy and the crowd, which includes the followers of Jesus, has given them the opposite.

"Have mercy on us!" "Be quiet!" It would make a great comic skit but perhaps a little close to home.

And these men shout all the louder.

"Lord, Son of David, have mercy on us!" Matthew 20:31b

These men have heard about Jesus and they recognise him for who he is. *Son of David* is a messianic title. Jesus is the Messiah, the Saviour. Jesus has come to save. Just prior to this passage, Jesus has been telling his disciples that he didn't come to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many. Jesus is going to Jerusalem to be crucified and he will be crucified as the Messiah. He will rise three days later, defeating Satan and with authority to forgive sins and to give eternal life. It brings us back to John 3:16 because that's the gospel in a nutshell.

For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.

John 3:16

If you want to be forgiven, if you want to receive God's offer of eternal life, ask God to forgive you and tell him that you believe in Jesus. Talk with someone here today or contact the Office to chat further about what it means to believe in Jesus.

These two blind men recognised Jesus as the Messiah and I am challenged by their response of shouting louder. Do you remember who's rebuking them? It's the crowd. It's not just one person taking them aside and gently saying, "You need to quieten down guys." The crowd is rebuking them... people these men can't see... people they don't know and who they won't physically be able to recognise if

something goes wrong and they need to seek justice. These men are in a vulnerable position. But their response is to shout louder because they recognise Jesus and Jesus is more important to them than the disapproval of the crowd and any potentially negative ramifications.

Personally, I don't enjoy conflict and perhaps you don't either. So, in the hypothetical of this situation, for me, I need to recognise my fear of the crowd and the sense of fear that rises to keep me quiet... to fly under the radar and not cause any waves... These men recognised Jesus and shouted louder and I need to follow their example, ignoring the disapproval of the crowd and focussing my attention on Jesus.

Matthew tells us that these two men are blind. Therefore, they were mostly likely beggars, dependent upon the charity of others to survive in a society without the government provision of social security in the forms that we can access, such as Centrelink or Medicare. People have been able to ignore these blind men all their lives. I can walk past because they can't see me... so I can't see them. I don't have to stop and help. But that's not how God calls us to treat vulnerable people... to ignore... to pretend they don't exist... to turn a blind eye to injustice. We need to model our behaviour on Jesus so let's see what Jesus does in response to their shouting.

"Lord, Son of David, have mercy on us!"

Well, the first thing Jesus does is he stops. He doesn't ignore them; he doesn't walk faster to get past them and he doesn't pretend he hasn't heard. He stops and then he calls,

"What do you want me to do for you?"

What a fascinating response! Jesus, the Lord of creation, the one who knows our thoughts and our hearts, the Son of God, the Messiah on his way to Jerusalem, asks the men a question. Jesus could have told them what they wanted. He already knew. The question and its answer is not for his benefit. It's for the men. It's for the crowd. And, ultimately, it's for us.

By asking that question, Jesus is laying his power aside and he is giving the men agency over their own future. He is treating them with dignity, modelling the very words he spoke in Jericho, recorded earlier in this chapter, about being a servant. Jesus' words here model humility in relationships and a graciousness that affords dignity to others.

As God's children we are called to do the same. Although our education and wealth may mean we feel that we know what is best for others, Jesus' example of humility calls us to lay aside our power and to serve others. When we partner in sharing the gospel, we need to have the mindset of Jesus and to serve others in humility. "This is what you need" - a top-down approach to anyone or any situation - is disempowering to the people involved and very different to the question asked by Jesus,

"What do you want me to do for you?"

Our education, our wealth, our western worldview all encourage a top-down, power-holding approach to relationships. But Jesus laid his power aside and asked these blind men a question and, in doing so, he gave them dignity. And that dignity is important as the story progresses and the men join that same crowd who rejected them on their journey to Jerusalem.

Jesus asks, "What do you want me to do for you?" The men reply, "Lord, we want our sight."

I really like these guys. They're asked a straight question and they give a straight answer. "What do you want me to do for you?" "Lord, we want our sight."

There's no guile, there's no doubting Jesus, there's no meandering around the question - "Oh... gosh... we don't know. What do we want? What's the socially acceptable thing to ask? Um, perhaps just a general blessing for everyone?"

No! It's, "Lord, we want our sight."

So, hypothetically, you're there by the road, there's a crowd passing by, but we know Jesus is there too, and it's Jesus who calls out to you and who says,

"What do you want me to do for you?" Matthew 20:32

What are you going to say?

Could you shout it out like those two blind men, or would there be some hesitation?

I think there's any number of reasons why we hesitate and we're going to consider a couple of those now.

These two blind men recognised Jesus, the Son of David, the one who could heal and give them their sight. So, when he asks them what they want they don't hesitate in telling him. Jesus - Lord of all, Creator, Redeemer, Son of God - has the authority and power to heal. If we're going to ask for healing, we need to understand that Jesus has the power and the authority to heal. Perhaps we don't ask for healing because we don't know Jesus, or we know him but we're not sure about his power or his authority. The blind men didn't ask anyone else for their sight - there's no point asking someone who can't deliver what you want. They asked Jesus because Jesus can heal and that's exactly what he did in this story.

Matthew tells us that in this encounter Jesus had compassion on the men and touched their eyes and they were healed immediately. The word used for compassion here is more than a feeling of pity towards these men but conveys the idea of a divine response towards troubled people. Do we expect Jesus to respond to our prayers with that same level of compassion, a divine response to us as troubled people?

Another reason why I think we hesitate to ask for healing is because we struggle to comprehend why prayers seem to go unanswered. People we have prayed for are still suffering or worse; we have prayed for people and we have asked for healing and some of those people have died. We don't understand why our prayers were not answered

and we struggle with our grief. Healing seems random... not necessarily fair and, rather than risking a 'failure' of our prayers, if you like, or the answer of 'No', we find it easier, more comfortable, not to ask for healing in the first place.

We can't get a black and white answer - say these prayers for this healing; living with this big area in the middle... with the ambiguity of grey... with not having a certain outcome is just too hard. And it is hard.

The Old Testament book of Job deals with suffering and unanswered prayers. Job suffered incredibly; his friends offered platitudes and expressed the prevalent religious worldview of the day - namely, that blessings equate to God's favour; suffering means you've done something wrong. And whilst Job longed to be vindicated, he was never told the reasons for his suffering nor was he privy to the divine drama being played behind the scenes that we can read in Job chapter one. What Job does understand, however, is that God is sovereign; he is worthy of our praise and there are some things we cannot understand.

"What do you want me to do for you?" Matthew 20:32

Let's see where we've been today.

Two desperate men have recognised Jesus and have stopped him on his way to Jerusalem. Jesus has ignored the rebuke of the crowd and engaged with these men, giving them agency in their healing and dignity as they join the crowd who rejected them.

The men shouted out their need for mercy, Jesus spoke with them, and they were healed.

Hopefully, we now know how we'll answer Jesus' question, "What do you want me to do for you?" But some questions remain. How are we going to respond when we ask for healing, but that healing is either not immediate or doesn't appear this side of heaven? What are we going to do?

In the reading from James this morning, we are told to confess our sins to each other and to pray for each other so that we may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective.

Therefore, confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective. James 5:16

Do we want our prayers to be powerful and effective? Do we want to pray and be healed? To pray and rejoice when others are healed? My guess is, yes! We do!

Then as God's people we need to bring our prayers to God with an attitude of humility. We are not God and we cannot know everything. A humble heart allows us to acknowledge our own limitations, to confess our sins and our fears and to place our trust in Jesus. The book of James encourages us to confess our sins to each other and pray for each other. There is a strong corporate aspect to this because God designed us to live in community... to be connected... to draw on the strength and faith of other believers to love and support us through dark times. I think this is one reason why God gave us his Vision for Kiama Anglican Churches - for his church to be Prayerful, Connected, Intergenerational and Transformed. God is calling us to learn and to love and to grow and to serve together. To be transformed; learning to pray for healing for ourselves and for each other is part of this transformation.

This is exciting and it's scary and many questions will be raised along the journey, but it doesn't mean we should stop before we've even begun.

The two blind men recognised Jesus and shouted loudly, "Lord, have mercy on us." "Lord, we want our sight." They kept asking and became followers of Jesus.

Let's pray for each other, let's ask for healing and let's keep following Jesus.