

Prayers

Opening prayer

Lord Jesus Christ, come into our world and bring Your deliverance. Use Your people the Church, to confront the powers of evil which seek to destroy families, break up nations, exploit the world and destroy peace. May we not be found wanting in our call to defeat the evils of this world and to challenge the authorities of this world with the Word of God. Come, Lord Jesus, come! AMEN

Prayer Suggestions

General theme for the week: vision

1. For yourself

Pray for the insight to see things as God sees them, and pray for the courage to accept all that God shows you

2. For your friends and family

Pray that together, you will know God's presence within your family and together with your friends. Ask the Lord to help you live a life of faith, hope and love

3. For the church and its work

Pray that the church will have the courage to take hold of the truths of God and proclaim them. Ask the Lord to give his people a new vision for their work.

4. For your neighbourhood, your country and the world (News)

Pray for peace, and pray for love. Pray that these things may be found within your country, and found within the world, of the world creator, and it's Redeemer.

Meditation

Rejoice to see the start of every day;
Believe the providential power of God
And see at work His universal laws
Of goodness, faith and hope and love.

Dispel the demons of today's despair;
The awful power of evil's dark intentions,
Driving backwards all for which we truly care
Towards the misery of loveless gloom.

Let God's power reign here and now
And hear Christ Jesus say, 'No contest!'
For deep within, the Spirit claims the ground
So we by faith can taste the victory He's won!

Bible Study

Bible passage – Matthew 8:1-4

¹ When Jesus came down from the mountain, large crowds followed Him. ² Then, a leper came to Him and knelt in front of Him and said,

'Lord, if you so choose, you can make me clean.'

³ He reached out His hand, touched him, and said,

'I do so choose; I declare you clean!'

And his leprosy was cleansed immediately, ⁴ so Jesus said to him,

'Make sure that you do not speak to anyone; however, go and show yourself to the priest, and offer the gift prescribed by Moses because it is the evidence they require.'

Review

As Jesus came down from the mountain after teaching the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew chapters 5 to 7), He lost no time in beginning the ministry that would bring Him into the public eye and propel Him towards Jerusalem, and ultimately, the Cross. The first incident after he came down from the mountain was the healing of a leper, in which Jesus showed amazing compassion and authority in reaching out to a man who was an outcast, and as far as the religious people of the day were concerned, ritually unclean. Jesus healed him with a touch and a command, and told him to go to the priests to prove to them he was healed! We will look in more depth at the details of the story in the main Bible study, but today, we will begin by examining how this story fits into this part of Matthew's Gospel

In order to get the most from our study, we will look at how the healing stories of Matthew 8 and 9 form an important part of Matthew's Gospel. These two chapters describe three groups of three miracles; firstly, the healings of the leper, the centurion's servant and Peter's mother-in-law (8:1-17), and these tell us how Jesus dealt with people. Secondly the stilling of the storm, the Gadarene demoniac and the healing of the paralytic (8:23-9:8), all of which highlight issues of discipleship. Thirdly, the healing of a woman who was bleeding and also a little girl, the healings of two blind men, and a mute man (9:9:18-34), which all emphasise prayer and faith. Only one of these is not a healing miracle (the stilling of the storm, 8:23-27), and all of this takes place near Jesus' chosen home town of Capernaum, except for the incident near the Gadarene towns (8:28-34). These chapters also contain two important passages in which Jesus discusses discipleship (8:18-22, and 9:9-17), and in addition, the end of chapter 9 gives another general account of Jesus' healing ministry (9:35-38).

The overall picture of these two chapters is of familiarity, with Jesus operating in places he knew well. Most of the people he ministered to either sought him out, had some contact with him via a friend, or had others who attracted Jesus' attention for them (for example, the centurion, 8:5ff and the synagogue leader 9:18ff). Also, he twice ministered generally to those who came to him; firstly, at the house of Peter's mother-in-law (8:14-17), and then at the end of chapter 9 (9:34-36).

Everything about these miracles indicates that Matthew was giving us as wide a flavour of the healing and deliverance ministry of Jesus as possible. Reactions to the miracles were varied, ranging from the disciples' incredulous 'who is this?' (8:27) to the despairing request for him to leave the Gadarene towns (8:34), to the astonishment of the crowds (8:8) and the comment 'they went and spread the news about Him' (9:31). The most important reaction however is recorded towards the end of these stories, when the Pharisees dismissed Jesus out of hand; 'by the ruler of demons he casts out demons' (9:34). Whilst Jesus was being recognised as the Messiah by ordinary people, the reaction of the Pharisees was to damn Him and say He was working for the Devil. Jesus refuted this later in the Gospel (12:22-36), but the hostility generated by the Pharisees was an indication of the persecution that awaited Jesus and His disciples.

At the end of chapters 8 and 9, after much successful ministry, Jesus left Capernaum (9:32), and began to talk to the disciples about how they must pursue the same ministry they had seen Him perform (9:38 and chapter 10). It was a daunting task!

Going Deeper

There is a great deal for us to explore within this fascinating story about Jesus; the manner in which the leper approached Jesus, Jesus' use of touch and his healing of the leper with a command, and everything that followed the healing. It all has considerable significance which is well worth exploring.

The Leper

The first great miracle in Matthew is the dramatic story of the leper who came to Jesus as He reached the bottom of the mountain where he had been teaching, surrounded by a large crowd (8:1). Remarkably, the leper knelt before Jesus in an act of homage and worship (8:2). This was the first time that Jesus has been honoured in this way since the Magi came to worship Him at His birth. The leper called Jesus 'Lord', and although this word was commonly used in Jesus' day when speaking to someone in authority, his actions and his words indicate that he approached Jesus knowingly believing that he was the Messiah. There is no recorded reaction from Jesus, but His consequent actions showed that he accepted the honour of the leper's worship. This should not surprise us as Jesus had already accepted His status as Messiah at His baptism.

(13:13f.) and He used this authority as He taught during the Sermon on the Mount. However, Matthew tells us that whilst everyone else was talking about this (7:28,29), the leper was the first person to address Jesus during his ministry with this worship.

There is some confusion as to what diseases were classified as 'leprosy' in Jesus' day. The Greek word used ('lepros') is not the usual one for what is called leprosy today (elephantiasis), and it is generally reckoned that 'lepros' referred to a range of skin diseases which were infectious, and covered by the symptoms outlined in Leviticus 13 and 14. In Jesus' day there was a resurgence of religious interest in purity laws as the Jewish people sought to separate themselves from the influence of the Roman / Greek culture of the day, and it is likely that strict observance of these laws were in force. Consequently, there were many people with a variety of skin diseases who could not take part in normal community life, scratching a living from the ground in communities that were ostracised. It is difficult for us to imagine the inhumanity of what happened, but we do not have to live with the consequences of rife infections within communities in the way that past generations did, so it is unwise of us to be too critical.

The leper's worship, and Jesus' response

It is all the more remarkable that the leper knelt in worship; for worship is what he was banned from because of his impurity, and he saw in Jesus his hope for healing and the one who was His true Messiah. The conversation between the two of them and the healing that took place was remarkable. In Mark's version of this story (1:41), Jesus was 'moved with pity', but Matthew records no such emotions. His focus was on Jesus' authority and will, and the challenge by the leper for Him to choose to heal. It was commonly taught and expected that when the Messiah came, he would 'heal lepers', so the crowd were waiting to see what would happen.

Jesus responded to the request by acting in a manner that was consistent with the teaching of His Sermon on the Mount (chps. 5-7). He acted first and spoke second, by reaching out to touch the man and then declaring him clean. The impact of what Jesus did would have been considerable. Some would have objected that by touching the leper Jesus was going against the law, and they had just heard Him say in the Sermon on the Mount that He would keep the law 'to the letter'. Certainly, touching a leper was forbidden in Leviticus (Lev 5:3). What such critics failed to see was that the healing was associated with the touch, not the words afterwards, and consequently, the leprosy went out of the man as Jesus touched him. Those who paid attention to what happened knew that Jesus had not broken the law at all! Jesus touched the man to make him clean, rather than the leprosy to take it away! Jesus therefore showed healing to be a higher ethical standard than the strict application of the letter of Levitical law, just as He taught in His Sermon.

The touch of Jesus

Jesus' touch was at the centre of the story in more ways than one. Jesus has already declared 'the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand' (4:17), and another translation of these words would be 'the Kingdom of Heaven is touchable', so there was a deep connection between the idea of 'touch' and the Kingdom of God. As Jesus touched and healed the leper, He made the Kingdom of Heaven real because He did not just talk about it, He put it into actions that people could see. Sometimes, in church today, you will hear the word 'manifest', and this is an example of what this word means, which is 'to make something visible'. The Kingdom of Heaven was therefore made manifest in the healing of the leper. Also, when Jesus chose to act, His will was aligned with His Father's will, for it was always God's will to make His Kingdom visible and evident in the world. What Jesus did was also a fulfilment of Scriptures such as these, which speak of God's desire to do what was just and right for all people who in need, 'You have power to act when you choose' (Wisdom 12:18) and, 'You can do all things ... no purpose of yours can be thwarted.' (Job 42:2). Both of these passages were fulfilled by Jesus' healing of the leper.

Finally, the cleansed leper was told by Jesus to 'go to the priest' as required by Levitical law, in order to offer the right sacrifices for cleanliness. In Mark's version of the story, the leper was disobedient and did not comply with Jesus' request; but Matthew did not record this because he was still focussed on Jesus rather than the leper. In asking the leper to go and 'offer a gift' he used words which recalled His teaching about what someone should do to be at peace with a neighbour (5:23ff); this was after all, what Jesus regarded as true cleanliness before God. In Matthew's version which we have read, Jesus also asked the healed leper to keep the story to himself, a theme of secrecy which crops in Matthew on many occasions (8:4, 9:20, 12:16, 16:20, 17:9). Many people have been puzzled by why Jesus should say this. However, at this early stage of His ministry, we can assume that Jesus was concerned not to be thought of as just another miracle worker. There were plenty of those in Israel and Palestine, and Matthew reflected that concern, helping us to appreciate that Jesus was not someone who worked miracles for the sake of showing power or for effect, but because they were signs of the Kingdom of God.

The close of the story talks of the gift offered by the leper as being 'evidence to them' (8:4), which begs the question, evidence of what and to whom? There are three possibilities of how to answer this question; firstly, that a miracle of healing had taken place, secondly that the Law of Moses had been fulfilled, and thirdly, that

Jesus had made the Kingdom 'manifest' through the act of healing the leper. The word that Matthew uses here which I have translated as 'evidence' is 'marturion' in Greek. It is used in two other places in the Gospel (10:18 and 24:14), and on both occasions the word indicates Jesus' fulfilment of His mission as Messiah. For this reason, the third option is best, which means the 'evidence to them' that Jesus wanted the leper to show to the priests, was evidence that Jesus was doing the work of the Kingdom of God.

Discipleship

Application

The Messiah was now demonstrably at work doing the will of God. Jesus' teaching was being proved by His actions, and the fruit was beginning to show! Today, Christians scour the healing miracles of Jesus to look at what He did so that they might learn how to 'do' the healing ministry. The best thing we can learn about the healing ministry from this story is that what is most important is the demonstration of the Kingdom of God by word and deed. This is clearly what Jesus was doing and he was following through the work He was called to do.

If we are to see lepers healed in our midst today, then we need to think carefully about what it means for someone to be an outcast in society as was a leper in Jesus' day. In different parts of the world today, those with AIDS might be regarded as 'outcasts' for example. In other countries even the elderly and infirm are treated as those who are shut away from normal social contact, and are equally 'outcast'. The task of those involved in the healing ministry is to identify such people within society and minister to them the healing love of God. It is a significant ministry.

Questions for groups

1. What diseases and conditions are the equivalents of leprosy today?
2. What is the significance of touch in today's society? Can we use touch to minister healing today? Are we properly understood by society when we do?
3. What does this story say to you about the work of Jesus, the Messiah?

Discipleship challenges

- *This passage today gives examples of great empathy and understanding on the part of Jesus. How can you be a means of grace in your church community, enabling the Spirit to work with empathy and understanding in order to bring healing and help to those in need?*
- *Pray for all those you know who are ill and in need of the care of others. Be a means of God's healing power through your prayers.*

Final Prayer

This is my prayer, Lord Jesus Christ; may I both be open to Your healing power, Lord God, and a minister of this same grace to others; and may Your church be the same and so fulfil its call. I ask this through Jesus Christ, the great Healer and Saviour of our souls. AMEN
