

## The Consequences of Being Human

*The Incarnation is widely associated with Christmas. But the Word did not become flesh for one day or season only. In these talks we consider the risk which God took in being one of us and one with us in Jesus.*

John Bell

### *Monday: Touched by Pain*

When Jesus entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil, asking, 'Who is this?' The crowds were saying, 'This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee.' Then Jesus entered the temple and drove out all who were selling and buying in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the money-changers and the seats of those who sold doves. He said to them, 'It is written, "My house shall be called a house of prayer"; but you are making it a den of robbers.' The blind and the lame came to him in the temple, and he cured them. But when the chief priests and the scribes saw the amazing things that he did, and heard the children crying out in the temple, 'Hosanna to the Son of David', they became angry and said to him, 'Do you hear what these are saying?' Jesus said to them, 'Yes; have you never read, "Out of the mouths of infants and nursing babies you have prepared praise for yourself"?' He left them, went out of the city to Bethany, and spent the night there.

*Matthew 21.10-17*

The Monday of Holy Week is the day on which we remember Jesus visiting the Temple. He had arrived in Jerusalem. He was cheered and feted by crowds and then either on the same day or the day after, he made his way to the temple.

The incident called 'The Cleansing of the Temple' happens at this time. Jesus physically and forcibly upsets the commercial enterprises which thrive in the House of God, infuriating the pedlars, moneylenders and priests alike. But that is not all he does.

He also congratulates children on their singing. They are simply imitating what they have heard their parents do; they fill the air with loud Hosannas. It might have displeased the temple choir to discover that the alleged Son of God seemed to prefer the sound of untutored voices to their well-rehearsed choral offerings. It certainly displeased the priests whose upbraiding of Jesus came to an embarrassing end when he quoted to them this from Psalm 12 in which God seems to have a preferential option for the sound of children's voices.

'Have you never read the text,' Jesus said to the priests, "You have made children and babes at the breast sound your praise aloud"?' *Matthew 21:16*

But between these two events – the turning of the tables and the singing of the children – there is another incident which is usually given scant attention:

In the temple, the blind and the crippled came to him and he healed them. *Matthew 21: 14*

At this point, I could do one of two clever things. I could indicate how in the reign of King David, the blind and the crippled were regarded as hostile:

David said, "Everyone who is eager to attack the Jebusites, let him get up the watershaft to reach the lame and the blind, David's bitter enemies.' That is why they say, 'No one who is blind or lame is to come into the Lord's house.' *2 Samuel 5:6-8*

It would be interesting to spend some time pondering how Jesus did not endorse the attitudes here and elsewhere of his most famous ancestor.

Or I could note how the Temple had areas of restricted access. In the book of Leviticus, it is made clear that people who are handicapped have to come nowhere near the altar:

No man... for all time who has any defect is to come and present the food of his God... no man with a defect whether blind or lame. He has not to profane my sanctuaries, for I am the Lord who hallows them.

*Leviticus 21: 16-23*

It would be interesting to ponder whether Jesus is indicating a change in the heart of God as regards hospitality to the infirm.

Both these allusions to Jewish tradition are interesting. They show that Jesus was prepared in public to defy both royal and religious conventions. But there is something more here.

One of the hallmarks of Jesus' ministry was his desire to heal people. The gospels, and particularly Mark's Gospel, are peppered with miracles, sometimes three to a chapter. In all, Jesus performs 31 miracles, of which 21, two thirds, involve the healing of bodies or minds.

There is not a long pedigree of this in the Judaism which Jesus inherited. There are twice as many uses of the verb 'to heal' in the New Testament than in the Old, even though the Old, the Hebrew Scriptures, has four times as many pages. We never find healing associated with the great mainline figures: neither the early patriarchs – Abraham, Isaac, Jacob or Joseph – nor the lawmakers Moses and Aaron; nor the military and political heroes Gideon, Joshua, Samuel, David, Solomon.

The desire and ability to heal seems to gather round the rather shady figures of the prophets Elijah and Elisha and then perhaps on only three or four occasions.

But with Jesus, his ministry has hardly started... twenty verses into the first chapter of Mark's Gospel.. and we find him healing. Nor does he restrict himself to one type or age or gender or status of person:

sometimes people who are lame or crippled.  
sometimes people who are deaf and dumb  
sometimes people who are blind  
a woman who is haemorrhaging  
a boy who has epilepsy  
a man who is paralysed  
a girl whose illness is not named  
and people who are demented either psychologically or spiritually.

If you were to look for a common denominator in these miracles of healing, you would look long and hard and find little.

In one instance he makes physical contact, in another he heals at a distance. Sometimes he shouts, sometimes he whispers; sometimes he spits, sometimes he sends the person on a journey; sometimes he heals instantly, sometimes he seems to require persuasion.

If we ask whether Jesus has a technique, we must answer definitely not. He responds as the individual and the occasion demands. There is no formula with Jesus. He is touched by the misery of pain.

However, there are two commonalities in his acts of healing, both of which led to charges against him.

## **Controversy**

The first is controversy.

One would imagine that the act of healing and the gift of healing would not evoke negative reactions. Making people better is laudable, a good thing. Well, let's consider some texts, and if we look carefully we will discover three reasons as to why healing becomes controversial enough for people to want rid of Jesus.

- |   |   |
|---|---|
| A | The unclean spirit threw the man into convulsions and with a loud cry left him. The onlookers were amazed and began to ask each other, 'What is this?' <i>Mark 1:26</i>   |
| B | When Jesus saw the faith in the man's friends, he said to him, 'My son, your sins are forgiven.' Now there were some scribes sitting there, thinking to themselves, 'How can the fellow talk like that? It is blasphemy!' <i>Mark 2:5-6</i>   |
| C | Jesus said to the man, 'Stretch out your arm.' He stretched it out and his arm was restored. Then the Pharisees at once began plotting with the men of Herod's party to bring about Jesus' death. <i>Mark 3: 5-6</i>  |
| D | When the townspeople saw the madman who had been possessed by the legion of demons, sitting there clothed and in his right mind, they were afraid... and begged Jesus to leave the district. <i>Mark 5: 15-18</i>   |
| E | Jesus said to John's disciples. 'Go and report to John what you hear and see: the blind recover their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are made clean, the dead are raised, the poor are brought good news – and blessed are those who do not find me an obstacle to faith.' <i>Matthew 11: 4-6</i> |
| F | They brought to Jesus a man who was possessed by a demon; he was blind and dumb, and Jesus cured him restoring both speech and sight. When the Pharisees heard of it they said, 'It is only by the prince of devils that this man drives devils out.' <i>Matthew 12:22-24</i>                       |
| G | The president of the synagogue, indignant with Jesus for healing a crippled woman on the sabbath, intervened and said to the congregation, 'There are six working days: come and be cured on one of them, and not on the sabbath!' <i>Luke 13: 14</i>   |
| H | Jesus found the crippled man he had cured in the temple and said to him, 'Now that you are well, give up your sinful ways or something worse may happen to you.' The man went off and told the Jews that it was Jesus who had cured him. <i>John 5:14-15</i>  |
| I | The man who had been given sight said to the Pharisees, 'To open the eyes of a man born blind – this is unheard of since time began. If this man was not from God he could do nothing.' 'Who are you to lecture us?' they retorted. You were born and bred in sin.' <i>John 9: 32-34</i>            |

### *Sabbath-breaking*

Jesus breaks the law, not the secular law, but the religious law, and that is an offence especially to those who believe that faith is essentially about rule-keeping. Petty legalists who seem incapable of empathy enjoy dividing people into good and bad, the like-minded on their side and opponents on the other. This kind of moralism rejects the enjoyment of the beauty, randomness and variability of life in preference for an obsession with codified behaviour.

When we look at the development of the Jewish legal code through the books of Exodus, Leviticus and Deuteronomy we can trace a working out of the historic Ten Commandments into a body of legislation which covers as many aspects of human behaviour as possible.

Jesus does not endorse this fetish. Indeed he regards it as anathema to God's intention. For him the Ten Commandments were made for human liberation, not for universal penalisation. The law was given to Moses so that, among other things, women would be kept safe from male predators, and vulnerable people be safe from misappropriation of their property and malicious gossip. The Law was a kind of benign *cordon sanitaire* preventing people from fear, damage and death. It was God's gracious word ensuring human safety and decency.

So when God gives the Sabbath, it is not so that ultimately people in the Western Isles of Scotland might one day tie up swings on a Sunday to prevent children from enjoying themselves. The sabbath was given so that everyone, irrespective of who they were, could have a rest:

the heads of the households and their children  
their employees and slaves  
even the farm animals were all given a rest.

*Exodus 20:8-12*

The reason for this rest is explicitly: God 'rested on the seventh day.' It was part and parcel of the fulfilment of God's work. Therefore those made in God's image were intended to be people who were liberated from exertion.

And Jesus knows this. And so not once but on half a dozen occasions he seems to flout the law by healing on the Sabbath. This is highly controversial. Of the above examples, four (A, C, G & H) happen on the Sabbath and result in condemnation. Indeed the direct result of Jesus healing the crippled man in the synagogue is that it encourages Jesus' opponents to plot his death.

But Jesus doesn't seem to care. His perspective is that to break the commandment, to heal on the sabbath, is to fulfil God's intention that people should be freed from pain, given a rest from illness. God did not intend pain to go unrelieved. And people of faith have no right to prevent health being restored.

Is this a word for today, this underpinning of the importance of rest, for a 24/7 society in which some would work every hour God gives them, and work or worry themselves to a frazzle, while others beg in the streets unemployed and homeless with no respite from living on the margins?

Has the Sabbath, the great humanitarian concept of a need for people to be loosened from what obsesses or demeans them, no place in our society? Might it even be that in the midst of the confusion caused by the coronavirus, some of us might find ourselves liberated from routines which have limited our capacity to be fully human?

#### *The sin syndrome*

Jesus also causes offence goes because he refuses to see illness as the direct consequence of sin. This puts him at odds with the Pharisees who believe – as some people still do - that there is a direct correlation. There are actually only two miracles in which Jesus allows for the association of sin and illness.

Years ago in North America I met a woman who had moved from being an atheist to becoming a believer. The church in which she was converted was ecstatic, even more so when her boyfriend, with whom she was living, came and got converted too. They got married in church and within a year they had become the parents of their first child. The church rafters rang with Hallelujahs because of the great things God had done for them. A year later she had a miscarriage, a year after that a still-born delivery. No one shouted Hallelujah then, but some people suggested that God might be trying to teach her something.

Jesus will have none of that, none of the branding sinful those who are the helpless victims of accident or infirmity, none of the unquestioning condemnation of those whose upbringing has never allowed them to know good from evil.

But if your whole belief structure is predicated on believers being healthy and successful by the grace of God, it is a bit of a turn around to discover that those who have been stigmatised, presumed guilty because of an illness are being healed by the one rumoured to be the Son of God.

#### *The rejecting community*

There is a third controversial aspect to the miracles of healing, which is that Jesus sometimes puts an onus on the community as the forum which affirms the healing of those it hitherto demeaned or isolated because of their illness. He sends healed lepers to priests to enable their acceptance back into the community which shunned them.

*Luke 17: 11-14*

## ***Monday: Touched by Pain***

More poignantly, he sends a man who has been demon-possessed back into the town where people had not just shunned him, but expelled him and with chains restrained him in a desert place. *Mark 5: 1-20*

This is the man whose healing so terrorises the local community that they beg Jesus to leave the vicinity. Whether it is because of the community reaction or a sense of vocation, this man asks Jesus if he can go with him. And Jesus forbids him to follow him. Instead he sends him back into the community which had expelled him. Why?

I suggest that the man may have had a spiritual or psychological illness which needed to be healed: but the community also had an illness, a moral myopia, a prejudice, a fear of those who are different. And the man previously known as the demoniac is commissioned by Jesus to enable a healing of the community which had rejected him and to bear witness to the great thing God had done.

### **Compassion**

The controversy which resulted from many of the healings would never have happened had Jesus had not been a person in whose innermost heart burned the fire of compassion.

Jesus is not interested in sick people as the means by which he can show his miraculous powers. He shows his miraculous powers because he is touched by human pain. This is clear in the Gospels:

A leper knelt before Jesus and begged for help. 'If only you will,' he said, 'you can make me clean.' Jesus was moved to anger; he stretched out his hand and said, 'I will; be clean.'  
*Mark 1: 40-41*

Looking at his critics with anger and sorrow at their obstinate stupidity, Jesus said to the man with the withered limb, 'Stretch out your arm.'  
*Mark 3: 5*

Aware at once that power had gone out of him, Jesus turned round in the crowd and asked, 'Who touched me?'  
*Mark 5: 30*

They brought a blind man to Jesus and begged him to touch him. Jesus took the man by the hand and led him out of the village.  
*Mark 8: 22-23*

A centurion said to Jesus, 'My servant is lying at home paralysed and racked with pain.' Jesus said, 'I will come and cure him.'  
*Matthew 8: 5*

Jesus said to two blind men, 'What do you want me to do for you?' 'Sir,' they replied, 'open our eyes.' Jesus was deeply moved.  
*Matthew 20:33-34*

There was a woman in the synagogue, bent double and quite unable to stand up straight. When Jesus saw her, he called her and said, 'You are rid of your trouble.'  
*Luke 13: 11-12*

When Jesus saw Mary weeping and the Jews who had come with her weeping, he was moved with indignation and deeply distressed. 'Where have you laid Lazarus?' he asked. They replied, 'Come and see.' Jesus wept.  
*John 11 33-34*

On the Monday of Holy Week, Jesus reverses his ancestor David's opinion of the blind, the crippled and the lame; and he rejects the rationale which keeps such injured and marginalised souls from the Temple because his is touched by their pain. But his response is not simply emotional, he comes into immediate proximity of those who are disabled and diseased, risking even his own health. This is, for me, part of the wonder of the Incarnation... that God should dare to be touched by us.

This also is a contributory factor for the persecution of Jesus. For if he is showing what God requires, can synagogues, can churches, local communities, even nations bear the comparable cost of compassion? This is one of the issues which has been facing governments all over world as they decide how to respond to the coronavirus crisis.

## ***Monday: Touched by Pain***

You can fear, revere and conjecture about a God who is beyond understanding, enveloped by the distant security of heaven. But you must either love or destroy a God who comes close enough to be touched.

### **Points to think about:**

- **'This is, for me, part of the wonder of the Incarnation... that God should dare to be touched by us.'** Reading this in the midst of the coronavirus lockdown, how does it make you reflect on the people who are, in this crisis, daring to be touched? And on those who need to be touched because they are suffering? How do you see God in this?
- **Can you think of contemporary instances when healing has been seen as controversial? Are there people or groups whose societies do not want them to be healed?**
- **Why does Jesus heal people and send them back into their communities, when he could assure them that their sins are forgiven and so they're all right anyway?**