

# WITH A LITTLE HELP FROM MY FRIENDS:

a sermon praught by the Rev'd John Millington Munns,  
Curate of Bridgwater St Mary, Chilton Trinity & Durleigh, Somerset,  
in the church of St Mary, Staten Island, New York,  
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[j.m.munns@dunelm.org.uk](mailto:j.m.munns@dunelm.org.uk)  
[www.stmarysi.com](http://www.stmarysi.com)

Isaiah xliii<sup>18-25</sup>, II Corinthians i<sup>18-22</sup>, Mark ii<sup>1-12</sup>.  
From the Gospel:



*When JESUS saw their faith, He said unto the sick of the palsy,  
Son, thy sins be forgiven thee.*

**In the Name of God, Father, Son and Holy Ghost:**

**AMEN.**



## THE HOLY GOSPEL

**A**ND AGAIN HE ENTERED into Capernaum, after some days; and it was noised that He was in the house.

And straightway many were gathered together, insomuch that there was no room to receive them, no, not so much as about the door: and He preached the word unto them.

And they come unto Him, bringing one sick of the palsy, which was borne of four. And when they could not come nigh unto Him for the press, they uncovered the roof where He was: and when they had broken it up, they let down the bed wherein the sick of the palsy lay.

When JESUS saw their faith, He said unto the sick of the palsy, *Son, thy sins be forgiven thee.*

But there were certain of the scribes sitting there, and reasoning in their hearts, *Why doth this man thus speak blasphemies? who can forgive sins but God only?*

And immediately when JESUS perceived in His spirit that they so reasoned within themselves, He said unto them, *Why reason ye these things in your hearts? Whether is it easier to say to the sick of the palsy, Thy sins be forgiven thee; or to say, Arise, and take up thy bed, and walk? But that ye may know that the Son of man hath power on earth to forgive sins, (He saith to the sick of the palsy,) I say unto thee, Arise, and take up thy bed, and go thy way into thine house.*

And immediately he arose, took up the bed, and went forth before them all; insomuch that they were all amazed, and glorified God, saying, *We never saw it on this fashion.*

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**T**HERE ARE MANY CURIOSITIES in today's Gospel story. We may happily sit and wonder how it was that these four men managed to get their sick friend up onto the roof of the house in the first place; we could question just how large and just how full a house has to be before a man who can't walk isn't let through on the strength of a polite Aramaian 'Excuse me'. There are all the questions about how you break your way through the roof of a house full of people without the entire structure caving in and crushing the lot of you. And if Christ knows what the scribes are thinking in their hearts, how come he doesn't seem to know that there's a poor guy sick of the palsy and in need of his help and having to be humped up onto the roof because he can't get in the door? These curiosities will have to remain just that. Of the story, we have what we have and will just have to leave the rest to our imaginations or faith, or something.

These technical curiosities, however, pale into insignificance when compared to the questions and queries of those who actually witnessed the event. As with so many of the events in JESUS' life, according to the Gospel accounts at least, this miracle raised the curiosity, to put it mildly of onlookers and participants alike. So much so that by the end they are, we are told 'all amazed, glorifying God' and muttering to one another about how they've never seen the like.

Were it not for curiosity it is unlikely that our story would have started in the first place. When he goes back to Capernaum, it would appear that crowds and miracles are the last things on JESUS' mind. Chances are he's gone to stay with the family of his friend and disciple Peter for a bit of rest and relaxation. But it's not to be, the gossips are out and within a few days he's being mobbed. I could, of course, draw parallels with young English curates going on holiday to New York for a break from the pressures and pleasures of parish life and finding themselves unable to resist the allure of a Staten Island pulpit – but I won't.

Suffice to say, it's curiosity that sets our scene, curiosity that causes the crowds, the crush, the press. And why not? Capernaum is a moderately sized town, fairly small by today's standards. Everyone knows Simon Peter and his family, the bar-Jonahs, and everybody's heard that Mrs Jonah has got that weird and whacky, but inspiring and exciting and wonderfully attractive Nazerene staying again, the one her Simon's been hanging out with and going all over the place with. And they say he works miracles, and they've heard he's made claims, some say he's a prophet,

some even the Messiah. And those po-faced Pharisees don't like him very much, so he can't be all bad. And you've just got to go and take a look.

So JESUS is there, preaching the word, and curiosity has drawn in the crowds. But then the really odd things begin to happen. There's these men, they're not curious, their desperate, and hopeful and full of faith. Their friend is severely ill and they know enough about this Nazarene to believe that he can help him, and they're so confident that they've got to get their man to him no matter what it takes. And they do! It involves removing a roof, but they do it. And then another curious thing happens. It's fairly clear what they want, they want some respite, even healing for their friend, but instead, JESUS forgives his sins. And so we learn two valuable lessons. We learn what's really important, what is the remedy to the dis-ease at the heart of the human condition, that it's the pardoning of our sins, the healing of our imperfection, that restores us to the image of God, to the human being of full stature that we were created to be.

And, the second lesson? We learn that that is what Christ wants for us and what he offers us. Oh, and there's a third lesson, and a fourth. We learn that this man is claiming exactly what the scribes and Pharisees fear – we might have known they'd be at the front of the crowd blocking the others' way – we learn that Christ does have the authority to forgive sin, an authority that is indeed God's alone. That this Nazarene can bring us back into a right relationship with God. How curious? And we learn, just for good measure, that all our other weaknesses and infirmities no longer have the power to diminish us when our sins are forgiven and we are restored to the image of God. So, now that you know what Christ can do, indeed has done for you. Take up your bed and go home – no more excuses!

**N**OW I THOUGHT THERE MIGHT BE A CHANCE I would have to stop my sermon there. Were it to happen, it wouldn't be the first time that a preacher has built up to that dramatic rhetorical flourish, *Take up your bed and go home!* and the congregation, two steps ahead as usual, have taken him at his word and gone home.

But there appear to be some of you still here, so I'll come on to what is, for me, the most significant curiosity about this little story. It's another lesson, and it's an important one. Our man on the bed needs help, he needs Christ, but it's only because of his friends, his determined, ingenious, devoted, faithful friends that he

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gets to come to him. Notice that it's not *his* faith, the sick man's, or at least not his faith alone that saves him. It's the faith of his friends. *When JESUS saw their faith, He said to the sick of the palsy, son, thy sins be forgiven thee.* We live in an extremely individualistic age in which, even in Catholic circles the emphasis can seem to be on 'me and my God'. We live in times when the cult of the individual is high and successful self-interest understood as a virtue. Yet in this story, set in a small Galilean town, JESUS sits amidst a community, a society, and the healing of one, the forgiveness of one, the restoration of one, depends on the efforts of others.

And it works both ways. If it weren't for the pious ones, the bossy, and pompous, religious ones who have pushed their way to the front of the crowd, oblivious to the cries of the needy behind them, then there would have been no need for those men to dismantle Peter's mother's roof. If it wasn't for those scribes and Pharisees' preoccupation with their own arguing and fussing and bickering – daring to demand even that God prove that he is God before they'll grant him a proper audience, then the sick man's way to Christ might well have been clear.

It's not that Christ is unavailable, unapproachable, but that he came to gather us all in and, as St John says, *Anyone who says he loves God, and hates his brother is a liar.* Christ calls us all, together; the God of Trinitarian Love can't favour some over others and can't reconcile forgiveness with selfish self-interest. It is possible for us, even the most pious of us, to make others' way to Christ more difficult and more treacherous. It is worryingly easy for us to be road-blocks to our fellow travellers, to divert, to mask, to hide.

That's the down side. There is, of course, an up side, and it is that which is attested to as clear as day by those five friends, the four going out of their way to bring the fifth into the presence of Christ that he may be ransomed, healed, restored, forgiven. And, of course, in his healing, they too get to come closer to Christ. We're all in this together, it's an unavoidable Gospel truth. In those five men we see mother Church at her best and we have a model of Christian living and Christian loving that we have little choice but to try to follow.

We need to leave Peter's mother to mend her roof, hopefully with a little help from her friends, as the song goes (English preachers in the US have to mention the Beatles at least once in every sermon, it's the law) and we need to leave our five friends to embrace life in all its abundance, which their faith promises them. And we need to leave our scribes and Pharisees scratching their heads, and hopefully seeking out their friends for a beer and a constructive chat. We need to prepare

ourselves for a meal, round one table, with one bread and one cup, and we need to recognise our reliance on our friends here, across continents and across time, saints on earth and in heaven, and we need to invite our other friends and give them a reason to come, and we need to seek out new friends, as I've been privileged to do this week in your wonderful city.

And as we do all this we will find we will come together again with our five friends from Capernaum, and with Peter and his mother, and probably with a fair few scribes, and we will sit and eat in friendship with the one who himself said at that first Eucharistic meal, *I call you servants no longer, but I have called you friends*, even our incarnate and glorified God,

*to Whom be ascribed all might,  
majesty, dominion and power,  
henceforth and for ever more.*

*Amen!*



© 2006 The Rev'd John Millington Munns,  
Emmanuel College,  
Cambridge  
[www.stmarysi.com](http://www.stmarysi.com)  
[j.m.munns@dunelm.org.uk](mailto:j.m.munns@dunelm.org.uk)