

MARK 3:1-6
HEALING WORD!

Moral Maze is a BBC radio 4 programme. “Here is a question and what is the answer to it?” All kinds of questions are debated and just when they seem to have the answer to the question, there is another view to add. There is a panel of people who listen to expert witnesses. What do we think about the topic of “Drugs in Sport and Human Enhancement”? What do we think about “the Selfie culture”? What do we think about “The morality of debt”? What do we think about the question: “What is our moral duty to Mediterranean migrants”? These are big questions and sometimes we find what we think are the answers to them, but then there are times when the question is too hard and we don’t want to commit ourselves to any answer. The debate gets heated! To discuss these big questions, we sometimes have to take a position, but then someone else will come along with another position and it stands against what we think and so the debate gets heated and there is a danger that people fall out over these big moral questions. We sometimes tend to avoid them because the quiet life is better than falling out!

We don’t like to be put on spot! It was Good Friday and I went to the shop for my newspaper; I knew the staff a little bit and they knew me. I went into shop quite happily and as I was buying my paper, one of the staff asked me a question. She’d been listening to the radio that morning and John Sentamu, Archbishop of York, had been speaking on *Pause for Thought*. It was Good Friday and he’d said something about hell in his piece. This had intrigued the member of staff and so she asked me what I thought about hell! As I say, it was 8am and it was coming out of the blue, but it was a question that needed an answer; I can’t fob it off; I’m being put on the spot so I need to choose what to say. Or the man who comes to talk to me about his wife’s major operation: the surgeon has asked him what he wants them to do if his wife gets into difficulty on the operating table; he comes to me to find answers to his big question, to his dilemma about her health and her quality of life, and how does he love her. These are big questions, being put on the spot we sometimes need to give answers, and most times we find that really hard.

I’m intrigued by the story in Mark chapter 3. This is another story of Jesus healing, in this case a man with a shrivelled hand. As I said earlier, we’re not told any more than that; we’re not told what was the cause of his hand being useless; we’re simply told that it was withered and that Jesus healed him when He said “*Stretch...*” (*Mark 3:5*) It is a simple story, if miracles can ever be simple; we see the power of Jesus at work as He speaks. We’ll come back to that at the end. But I’m also intrigued, and perhaps even more so, by what is going on in the background. One writer suggests that “the healing is almost incidental to the main point of story” (RT France) and I can see why he said that! There is more going on in the background than the healing itself. There are tensions that are clear; there are plots and plans; the man may even have been a “plant” to test Jesus; there is a moral question that no-one answers. Against all of that background, Jesus heals the man with the power of His word, God is at work in the world, God is at work in someone’s life by the power of His word.

There is a question about motives: why were these people there? “*Some of...*” (*Mark 3:2*) There was a group of people who were in the synagogue that morning simply to see what Jesus would do and to see if they could accuse Him. They were not there to worship; they were not there to listen for the Word of God; they were there to try to trap Jesus and accuse Him of breaking the law. They were there to see what Jesus would do. They were not taking part in worship; they were spectators there for all wrong reasons. There is tension in the air!

Then there is the issue: that vexed issue of the Sabbath; it is still an issue that rumbles on for some. Jesus' enemies are not worried about the healing as such; but they are deeply worried that He might heal someone on the Sabbath. The Sabbath was the day of rest, that is what the word means, and there was a command to do no work on the Sabbath. The rabbis had described 39 different categories of work and all of them were banned on the Sabbath and if you did any of them you were condemned as a law-breaker! Would Jesus heal this man on the Sabbath? That would be work and so He shouldn't do it; if He did, He would be condemned as a law-breaker. The Law would allow Jesus to heal if the man needed healing in order to save his life, but his life is not really in danger; that's not an option.

Then there is the question: "*which is...*" (Mark 3:4) There's the *Moral Maze* question. Tricky! What do you think is the answer? Jesus frames the question very carefully and it is about the Sabbath and people's attitude to what is "lawful"; what does the law of God teach? There are two options in the question: Option 1: to do good on the Sabbath, to help and heal the man, to save his life which in this case means to give him back his quality of life and the ability to use his hands for work and look after his family; being given back his hand, he will be given back his dignity and self-respect. What would you do? Option 2: is to do nothing; that Jesus should do nothing to help this man, that He ignores his need and heals him tomorrow; the implication is that not to do good is to do evil, that not to save his life is to somehow kill and spoil. What would you do? Would you do good for the man and forget the Sabbath command? Or would you ignore the man in order to keep the Sabbath? What would you do?

"*They...*" (Mark 3:4) Did they not know the answer? But there is something else here: there is power of Jesus' words; He has put them on the spot and they are not prepared to be on the spot; it is uncomfortable to be on the spot and Jesus has challenged them to take a stand. They can't say "Do good" because they could be accused of breaking God's law on which they stood so firmly; they can't say "do nothing for man" because they would be shown up as heartless and uncaring! Jesus' words have them beaten; they can't win; they are lost in a moral maze of their own making and there is no way out for them. Their only response is to stay silent. "*He looked...*" (Mark 3:5) and the story ends with them breaking the Sabbath in a totally different way: "*Then the...*" (Mark 3:6) What would you have done? It is easy to blame the rabbis, but they were in a situation where they couldn't win; Jesus healed the man because His answer was that it is always better to do good.

"It is better to err on the side of goodness than on that of heartless adherence to regulations" (RT France) Your sheep has fallen into a pit; your first reaction is to rescue it, of course. But it is the Sabbath. So, do you rescue your sheep to save its life, while all time knowing that this is work and you are breaking the Sabbath; or do you leave your sheep in the pit till the next day, leaving it without food and water knowing that it might die of thirst or starvation? That's another version of the same question, the same incident. Someone has pointed out that the Galilean farmers would be chuckling to themselves as these city rabbis are agonising over the moral maze created for them by this question. The farmers know that there is really no dilemma at all; they will rescue their sheep; they will do good on the Sabbath because to leave the sheep in the pit is wrong and will maybe even kill the sheep. It is better to err on the side of goodness; it is better to do good whatever the day of the week.

Isaiah 55 paints a picture of God's words achieving things in our lives. "*As the...*" (Isaiah 55:10f) We may not like all this rain, but at times we need it; the earth is watered and things grow by the water the rain gives; the rain fulfils its purpose. That's the picture and then the prophet has a point to make: God's word has a purpose as

well and it does not return to God empty, but God's word does what God sends it out to do. What is Jesus' purpose in His question in the synagogue?

Jesus words are healing words. "*Stretch out...*" (Mark 3:5) Fantastic! Jesus speaks words that change and heal our lives: He speaks words that forgive us our faults and mistakes, words that take away our sense of guilt. Jesus speak words that save, that bring life into our hearts in the deepest and fullest meaning of that word; Jesus speaks words that help us, that guide and lead us through the choices and dilemmas of life, He speaks words that make us strong, that give courage to our hearts and minds; He speaks words that show how much we are loved. Listen for these words and take them to heart.

Jesus' words also challenge us: is it better to do good? Do you really think that? What do you value in life? Where do your priorities lie? What kind of people will you be? These questions get under our skin at times until we resolve them for ourselves. They make us feel uncomfortable because they challenge us. Jesus speaks about the kingdom, life when Jesus is King of our lives and the values of His kingdom are very different from the values of the world. When we read the Bible there is more going on than we sometimes realise: we think we are reading a story from an old book and that story is vaguely interesting; but then that story gets under our skin and nags away at us, till we deal with the question it asks us, till we answer it, till we come to faith in Jesus, till we change our lifestyle to live in Jesus' ways. God is at work to make us more like Jesus; it starts with reading the Bible.

Put yourself inside the synagogue on that day: what are you seeing? You are seeing some rabbis squirm under Jesus' question; you have a quiet smile to yourself at their discomfort because you can see that they're not happy. But then, something else happens: you begin to find that the question has got under your own skin and is now not so much a question for others, but about "how can I do good for someone? How do I make sure that I do good? How can what I do save life or do I simply do nothing to help?" So all of a sudden, I'm being asked that question by Jesus about my life; you're being asked that question about your life. What will we do? Will we take up the challenge or will we stubbornly resist the question? Will we let Jesus' words shape our lives? Will we let the Bible be the map for our journey? Will we listen for the word that God speaks to us today?