

MATTHEW 8:1-4
 “IF YOU ARE WILLING...”

If you had the chance to ask just one question of Jesus, what would it be? It could be about anything; about something that bothers you, something that intrigues you about His mission; it could be about something that you've always wanted to know? There is a high chance that before very long, someone would have a question about healing; it is the single biggest issue for most of us as we see people we know and love struggle with illness, yet we read lots of miracle stories in the New Testament of Jesus' healing lots of people. We'd want to know why He hasn't always appeared to listen to our prayers, or answer us; we'd want to know why He appears to be willing in our story today, but appears to be unwilling now! These are the kinds of questions that work away in our hearts and sometimes worry away in our heads, but very rarely come out except when we start talking about some of these issues in church. Maybe we should talk about them more in church. If you have another question, tell me what it is.

The man who came to Jesus was suffering with leprosy; he was not the only person who came to Jesus with this question. Leprosy still exists today and can still be a debilitating sickness as it affects the skin and the extremities of the body, fingers, toes, and people who have leprosy suffer great pain and disability as a result. It begins by attacking the small nerves in the surface of the skin and that loss of sensation means that injuries to the skin go undetected and create infection. Untreated it can go on to affect the larger nerves and result in the loss of fingers and toes. It can be treated by drug therapy to stop the progress of the disease and surgery can restore hands or feet, but nothing can turn back the clock in terms of disability. There is also still a stigma that comes with leprosy: people are still marginalised by society as a result; their job, education and marriage prospects can all be destroyed by this stigma, when leprosy is seen as a curse for something done recently or in the past. Some of you give to the work of the Leprosy Mission in helping to support people in this dreadful situation.

Much of this was attached to the man who came to Jesus. He had the disease and the disease was the same then as it is now. He was touched by the stigma of leprosy and was regarded as “unclean” by the other people in his village. Had to warn people that he was coming so that they could keep out of his way. There was a whole set of rules that governed people with leprosy and other infectious diseases and it was the priest who diagnosed this disease and only the priest who could declare him free and clean. For all of these reasons, the man came to Jesus looking for healing; his deepest desire was to be free and clean and he came to Jesus; maybe he has tried all the other healers and nobody would go anywhere near him.

His question was slightly strange: *“Lord, if...” (Matthew 8:2)* First of all, this is a confession of faith. Jesus is able... “you can...” It is clear that this man believes that Jesus has the ability and the power to heal. Perhaps he has heard stories of other healings that Jesus has performed and these stories have convinced him that Jesus has the power to meet his need. He believes; Jesus is able. That's how this works: we hear stories of Jesus and what He is able to do; we either read these Bible stories that tell us of Jesus's power and what Jesus has done; or we hear stories from other people, testimony to Jesus's ability to help, heal or save them, and we hear these stories and we believe that Jesus is able... *“to him...” (Ephesians 3:20)* *“Because He ...” (Hebrews 2:18)* *“He is able...” (Hebrews 7:25)* *“to Him...” (Jude 24)* Our man is persuaded that Jesus is able! This is all about what we believe; can Jesus do these things? Can Jesus save us? Can He help us? Can He answer our prayers? The New Testament tells us that He is able to do all these things. Our man believes Jesus can!

But his question is about willingness. “Will Jesus heal me? I believe he can, but I’m not sure if He will want to!” So He comes to Jesus saying “*Lord, if...*” (*Matthew 8:2*) There is something slightly unsettling about that question: why would he even cast doubt on Jesus’ willingness? Don’t we know that Jesus is full of love and compassion for everyone? Don’t we see how much He cares? It is a question that resonates clearly with us: we know what Jesus is capable of, but if we have doubts at all, it is this – we doubt that He is willing to do anything for us. He can answer our prayers, but we are just not sure that He will.

It is no surprise that our man feels that way. As a leper, he has spent years being told to stay out of the way because he is rubbish. He is a social outcast, living outside the village; he spends his life warning people that he’s coming so that they can stay out of his way; so there is little surprise that when he meets Jesus, he is deeply unsure that Jesus will want to help him. If you’ve spent your life being told by people that you are rubbish or that you should have no hopes or aspirations, then when someone comes along to pay you some attention and take an interest, you are still deeply suspicious. “They won’t want to love or care for me, because I’m so uninteresting!” We are more uncertain that Jesus will want to save us and be willing to help us; we can understand that He is able, but we’re not so sure that He will want to save us; we know our weaknesses, faults, and failings, so we harbour a sense of doubt and distrust in Jesus’ willingness to do anything for us.

Jesus blows all of that suspicion and distrust and doubt out of the water when He simply says “*I am...*” (*Matthew 8:3*) He does for the man what nobody else had done for years, He touched him and then sent him to the priest for his healing to be verified. For the man to be readmitted to society he needed a certificate from the priest. When he got there, that’s exactly what happened. The man was healed, clean, free; his new life could begin. It all started because of the love and compassion of Jesus. Love and compassion opened a new door for the power of Jesus to change a man’s life. Jesus told him to say nothing about this to anyone: there is a whole theme in the gospels about this kind of silence and we think it is there for the simple reason that Jesus feared He would be misunderstood; He did not come as a miracle worker, but as a Saviour; He is not a magician, He is Messiah. The leper’s changed life is testimony enough to tell his village about Jesus’ power.

What do you think God thinks about you? That’s a big question. I’m not asking what you think about yourself, but I know that what we think about ourselves often shapes what we think God thinks. We think that we’re the bees-knees, that we’re wonderful, fantastic; God just has to bless us and make us rich, financially as well as spiritually! Or, we think that we’re a waste of space, that we are totally unworthy of God and His love because that’s what we’ve been told over and over again by people who know these things! Of course, these are the extremes and there is a whole spectrum of views about ourselves in between. There are days when we might be very positive about ourselves; there are days when we’re exactly opposite. The leper thought he was a waste of space because that’s what he’d been told and so he was full of doubts and mistrust of Jesus! The magazines tell us that our body-shape and size is all wrong; our culture tells us that Christian faith is irrelevant; people appear to laugh at us when we raise big questions and challenge accepted thinking. Our view of ourselves is shaped by all of these things and more!

What does God think of us? The clues are there in what we see of Jesus. God loves us: how do we know? Well, we see that love modelled in Jesus, His compassion for a needy man, His love for lots of people in need, His love poured out on the cross. God promises to be with us always and everywhere because Jesus came to live in our world and share our human nature. God listens to our prayers and answers us. We know these things to be true, in generalities;

but how do I know these are true for me? God's love is big enough for everyone. It is the Spirit's job to persuade us that this is for us. Pray for the Spirit to help you see that God's love is for you; pray that the Spirit will convince you; pray that the Spirit will open your heart to see Jesus as your friend. Paul prayed for his friends in Ephesus: "*I pray...*" (*Ephesians 1:18*) It is hard to change this; our way of thinking about ourselves is ingrained; but to see ourselves as God sees us... We are people of value, people of worth and dignity; we are the children of God whom He loves endlessly and for whom Jesus died; this is who we are, each and every one of us; do you hear that?

What a fantastic discovery, to find out that we are loved by God as we are, completely, totally, unreservedly loved! This is what God thinks of us. He knows our faults and failings, but He loves us. He knows our gifts and good points and He loves us. The man who, for years, was told that he was rubbish, and people crossed the street to avoid him – it is no surprise that he doubted Jesus and wasn't sure about trust; it is no surprise that his prayer was tinged with reservations. "*Lord, if you...*" (*Matthew 8:2*) Jesus loved, cared, listened, answered. We are loved, cared for, listened to – this is what God thinks of us; we are His children; Jesus is our friend.