

MATTHEW 9:1-13
BROKEN LIVES MENDED

Did you ever take part in the Balloon debate? It's an old favourite of debating groups: there is a balloon with one space left to fill and you have to argue for your character to have that space. It tends to be characters rather than yourself; historical figures are the biggest favourite. So you have to argue for Abraham Lincoln, someone else for Napoleon, Queen Victoria, David Livingstone or Isambard Kingdom Brunel. You have to argue the case for your person to get that last space in the balloon: what achievements does he/she have to offer, their character and personality, their gifts and abilities and in turn you argue the case for each person and at the end there is a vote amongst the audience – which case has been argued most successfully; the winning candidate gets the space and escapes impending disaster; he or she is saved by the balloon! It can be good fun.

The great thing about a debate like that is that it focuses your mind on what you think is important. Every one of these five people has something to offer to the new civilisation after the disaster from which the balloon is rescuing you; so every one of these five people has a reason to be saved. For some it would be their gifts and skills, the engineer who is able to make and build things. For others it would be their character and qualities, the person of faith who could help build a new society on the right kind of foundations; or it might be a powerful person who would be able to offer leadership and to inspire people to follow them. When you have to decide which to choose, it comes down to what you think really matters: abilities or character or power and so on. One of the five is rescued by the balloon!

Imagine the same kind of debate in the synagogue in Capernaum - except this time it is real people who are being talked about. Who's for saving? Who's not? The Jews had, it seems, a clear idea of who was in and who wasn't. People like them were in! They liked people who kept the rules and who were respectable! I suppose the church has been the same at times. I was reflecting not so very long ago on the Church in Scotland and its relationship with the poor in our society. The Church is at its weakest in the poorer parts of our cities, small churches in huge housing estates. It has been like that for a long time. The Church is strongest in the suburbs and it still is! Has the Church given the impression that we need to be suburban middle-class to be Christian? There are people who have believed Jesus but have not found their place in the Church for one reason or another; it is too easy to blame the individual for not trying hard enough! What if we have told them, or even given the impression, that they don't fit and are not allowed?

There are two people in Matthew's gospel today who needed rescue; one came looking and the other accepted it when it came his way. At the centre of both stories is Jesus. He is quite prepared to push the boundaries and to meet these people and help them, even if He provoked controversy. He was not afraid to meet real people and deal with their real needs, no matter who they were. The beauty of the gospel is that it is for everyone and people of all shapes and sizes found their life, health, salvation with Jesus. Writing about the Church, Paul could say: "*there is...*" (*Galatians 3:28*) Jews and Greeks, slaves and free people, men and women – they all found themselves at home in Christ; they all found Jesus to be their Saviour; the Church was this great partnership, a community of faith made up of people of all shapes and sizes, and they rejoiced together in the grace and love of Jesus. They were accepted by Jesus so they accepted one another.

The first person is paralysed, lying on his mat. He is completely dependent on his friends to go anywhere, it would seem. His friends decided to bring him to Jesus so that Jesus might heal him. This took place in Capernaum, Jesus' home town by this time; He had obviously developed a bit of a reputation as a healer. These men brought their friend to Jesus to be healed. But Jesus did more than heal, and, boy, was there controversy! What did Jesus say, first? *"Take heart..."* (Matthew 9:2) The man wanted to walk; his friends brought him to Jesus so that Jesus could make him walk again. The religious leaders were watching to see Jesus perform another healing. Everyone was taken totally by surprise. *"Your sins..."* Why did Jesus say that? Some people believed then that sickness was a judgement from God on sin, and that people suffered because they'd been bad! Jesus refutes that! More likely, Jesus saw a deeper need in this man's heart than his physical paralysis, that he needed to be reconciled to God and the only way for that to happen is through the forgiveness of his sins. So Jesus said *"Your sins..."*

Here is a balloon debate of a whole different kind! "Who does he think he is? Only God can forgive sins! How dare he!" The Jews were outraged at Jesus for speaking like this. They were right, of course; only God can forgive sins; what they didn't see was that, here, in Jesus, God was in world. So Jesus makes the claim and we see His power and authority as the God-given Messiah and Son. He has some clever questions: *"Which is easier..."* (Matthew 9:5) He can blithely say *"your sins ..."* and nobody can tell if you've done it or not! It is easy to say, impossible to prove. *"But so ..."* (9:6) He can say "take up your mat" and people see and know whether you can make it happen. So Jesus heals the paralysed man and, in doing so, He demonstrates His power to heal and His authority to forgive. Thanks to his friends for bringing him, thanks to the power and grace of Jesus, this man's life is mended; he is rescued.

The second man is different. Matthew is a tax-collector. If you work for HMRC would you admit to it, especially in parts of Glasgow just now? It used to be that people who worked for the Inland Revenue never acknowledged where they worked to members of the public, they were simply 'civil servants'. I'm sure there were good reasons for that, rather than simply that the public hated them, but that might have been part of it. Matthew is a tax-collector, so he's not top of the popularity stakes in Capernaum for that reason alone. There are two other reasons: he worked for the Romans, either directly or indirectly, being seen as a collaborator with the invading army; there was the inevitable corruption meant that Matthew would be rich with other people's money. He is sitting in his booth beside the road through Capernaum, ready to collect the tolls and dues from people passing by. I wonder whether Matthew had met Jesus before, but we don't know. Jesus simply said *"Follow me"* and Matthew did; he got up, left his desk and followed Jesus.

We don't know anything of Matthew before this; other than what we've said about tax collectors, we know nothing of his life, what he was like, how he lived, what he needed. Jesus called him and he became a disciple. I came across this the other day: "What Matthew lost and what Matthew found: he lost a comfortable job, but found a destiny. He lost a good income, but found honour. He lost a comfortable security, but found an adventure the like of which he had never dreamed" as a disciple of Jesus. (Barclay) Life was never the same again for Matthew; he was a new man, with new priorities, and new challenges and from that day on, his life was rich; he discovered the blessing of God on his life. He left behind his tax collector's desk and what did he take with him? Someone suggested that the only thing he took with him was his pen and he wrote the account of Jesus that bears his name and tells his story.

Matthew was so delighted with his new life that he held a dinner party for all his friends and invited Jesus! Jesus went. There was more controversy. *“Why does...” (Matthew 9:11)* These are the wrong people. Jesus is wrong to associate with people like this, according to the Jews! They are beyond the pale, unclean, to be avoided at all costs! But Jesus said: *“It is...” (Matthew 9:12f)* Can you see irony in the Bible? “There are people who consider themselves perfect; they need no help from anyone; they don’t need my help; I’ve come for people who recognise their need!” Jesus had this deep sense of mission to help and rescue people in need, even if they were “undesirable”. Jesus came to meet real people and to help people in need, whatever that need may be; He came to rescue people, He came to set the blessing of God on people’s lives; He came to challenge people to be disciples, to get their priorities right.

What’s this all about? There are two views of real life here. The first is what we might call “the religious view”: it is all about what we do, how we keep the rules, the boxes that we tick. “We do this each week and that every day and we’re quite good at it, by the way!” But the danger of that view of life is that it is superficial, that it meets a need for an hour on Sunday and little more than that! It’s for us and people like us and we need people to conform to our view and our way. We want everything to be neat and tidy; we can’t stand mess and we can’t tolerate people who don’t fit the mould!

The second is Jesus’ view! Life is about **faith** and what we think and believe – most of us are not always sure what we believe and why we believe it; we are feeling for a faith that is stronger and more certain, we would describe ourselves as a work in progress as far as faith is concerned; we like the idea and wish we had it, but... Life is about **kindness**, love and loyalty about being the right kind of people and again we like the idea, but we’re not always sure what it means; we get it right at times, but then we make mistakes; we want to be kind, loving and loyal. Life is about being **disciples** of Jesus, having someone to admire, copy, imitate, and follow; we recognise how good that is, that it should be a priority, but we struggle to keep making it a priority because of other things. Life is about **Jesus** being with us and again we recognise at times that He is there, then we forget; then we’re reminded and we take strength and comfort, then we’re challenged; Jesus is with us to help us. This view of life is messy; it is not as cut and dried as even we would like.

“Your sins are forgiven...” “Follow me!” Jesus speaks to real people in their real world and touches their real lives. This is what the gospel has to offer. The Saviour of the world brings grace to broken lives; the Saviour brings the blessing of God to us in our real world and real lives. We have hopes and aspirations; we have regrets and faults; we have a need for forgiveness; we have a desire to be more faith-full. Into these real lives Jesus comes with grace, forgiveness, salvation and offers us the blessing of God, His lavish love, the adventure of a lifetime. For this balloon debate, there is not just one place with the question “Who’s for rescue?”, but there are places for everyone who believes. Real lives, real issues, real people - getting to the real heart of the matters for us is what Jesus does and He brings us the grace, love and peace of God.