

Heiner SCHUBERT (CH)

18/08/2017

Translation : Mark PALMER

JESUS AS THERAPIST

(Mark 2, 1-12)

I.

Not so long ago a woman, about 50 years old, was telling me how she nearly died from a burst appendix.

She told me how the family doctor had at first misdiagnosed her, and how her parents had taken her, in great pain, to the hospital. She was 12 years old at the time. When the woman was telling me her story, she found it very difficult to carry on speaking, and I could see how deeply upsetting the memory was for her. I understood how traumatic the experience must have been. I asked if she had had some sort of near-death experience. She looked at me in astonishment. It was not the fact that she had nearly died that was traumatic. When they arrived at the hospital with their sick daughter, her parents were sent home by the nurses. When the girl woke from the anaesthetic after the operation, she found herself in a corridor, alone, in her hospital bed. No one was there; no sign of anyone who might have explained what had happened; no one present who could have held her hand. In her memory she remained alone with her fear and uncertainty for what felt like an eternity. In tears, she told me that this was the worst moment of her life.

Before saying something about Jesus as a healer, I want to praise the four friends. They did not abandon their unfortunate comrade. It is no coincidence that all three synoptic Gospel writers tell the story of the friends who act on behalf of their friend and are even prepared to commit a criminal offence. That is what I find moving in this story. I am convinced that the listeners of the time were being instructed in something that we too should pay heed to: being reliant on each other is part of being human. Or to put it another way: loneliness makes you ill. Some years ago, a study from the USA likened the harm caused by loneliness with smoking 15 cigarettes a day. Paul compares the community with a body, where all the different organs and limbs have an indispensable function. It is fair to say the picture has its limits, and Paul's primary context in using it was not medical. It is a tenet of Christianity that faith is only accessed in dialogue. He writes: "If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honoured, every part rejoices with it." (1 Corinthians 12, 26). Community has a healing effect. Holding a patient's hand is therapeutic. It is a contribution which should not be underestimated. When the woman was telling me about her traumatic experience, how as a twelve-year-old she had been left alone in the hospital, I could not help but think of the story of the four friends. They did not abandon their comrade. He knew that he was being carried, in the truest sense of the word.

In an exchange with fellow pastors at the end of last year some told me they could never pray for a patient. It did not accord with their image of God. How awful, I thought. Of course, it is not always appropriate, and not in every situation. Sometimes silence is better than talking. But in many cases prayer is certainly more than the mere request to be healed. It is a strong sign of solidarity. Above all, it is an eminently important sign that God is not far away, capricious, or the dispassionate Prime Mover; rather, God has a heart that can indeed be touched. The presence of God is shown particularly in those moved to prayer. Prayer can intensify the feeling of being carried. I know from many accounts that this can also sometimes work from a long way away. Naturally, this is not an objective truth. It is revealed only to those who have experienced this type of being carried. It is down to the competence of the pastor if prayer is not to awaken false hopes or to cover something up. But we can allow ourselves to hope for the 'intervention' of God; to hope that he will lay His hand on the person prayed for. Above all, we can allow ourselves to hope that God – like the four friends – is moved by human suffering.

This brings me to a further thought: as Christians, we believe in the triune God. Could the picture of the four friends be an invitation to us to picture the present collectively, hand in hand, as it were, with the God who is three in one? In this idea, we would be the fourth person, so to speak, in the trinity of those who help to carry the burden.

II.

I now want to turn to Jesus. His behaviour as a healer is, to begin with, paradoxical. While everyone is expecting a spectacular, physical cure, he tells the paralysed man that his sins are forgiven. Some of the bystanders must have been dreadfully disappointed in that first moment. "Forgiveness of sins imparts wings" is my free translation of the synoptic Gospel writers. Now, we can speculate about the nature of the patient's paralysis, whether it is psychosomatic, a little bit like Terry the dancer's paralysis, who loses the use of her legs in Charlie Chaplin's last film *Limelight*. We could also ask whether Jesus is not just saying it to annoy the theologians who are present; whether he is not, to a certain extent, using the unfortunate man to get one over them.

But I think both of these speculations come up short. In the thinking of the time, the sick were damaged and therefore of lesser value. The sick were regarded as unclean. There are numerous laws in the Old Testament which are concerned with the cleanliness of man and beast. We can dismiss this as archaic, but those, like yourselves, who are treating the sick and disabled, know how deeply ingrained such prejudices are. One of the worst accusations to have found its way into public discourse in recent years, is talk about fraudulent invalidity claimants. Such language has deeply offended my brother who has suffered from multiple sclerosis for 30 years. It is clear that these wildly unsubstantiated suspicions hit the wrong targets. Nonetheless, they are expressed. They place all those who suffer illness under general suspicion. The idea that someone who suffers is in some way branded is deeply ingrained. The second, weightier consideration is the dominant idea in Jesus' day that sickness was a punishment for sin. Jesus himself continually opposed this idea (John 9, 2). Recently I had a discussion with a young Christian who told me that Job's friends were actually in the right. If Job really was without sin, he wouldn't have suffered so much. I was unsuccessful in my attempts to interpret Job as a text which was written precisely to reveal this way of thinking as obsolete, i.e. as wrong.

However, we cannot simply ignore the fact that we know much more today than people in the past did about those forms of behaviour which promote illnesses, and those that prevent them. To a certain extent we have this knowledge at our disposal. And yet, in another sense, we don't, because countless factors come into play. But, most importantly, the question of guilt doesn't get us anywhere.

That is precisely why Jesus says, with the intention of healing: "Your sins are forgiven." Jesus takes the paralysed man away from the circular argument around guilt which dominates everything. Jesus' message is aimed firstly at the man lying on the stretcher. He liberates him from the burden of being to blame for his own condition.

But then Jesus' message is aimed at the bystanders. Precisely because the paralysed man remains paralysed following the granting of forgiveness, it is evident that there is no connection between his paralysis and possible guilt. Only after this does Jesus heal him, and he does this with a certain nonchalance, as if it were incidental. The healing seems to us to be the spectacular part of the story; but in truth, the way the story is told, it is forgiveness of sin. This must give food for thought to those of us who have chosen the vocation of helping others. The sick are more than their sickness; those with disabilities are, first and foremost, people. In the story of the paralysed man and his four friends, care of the soul and the healing of physical infirmity come together. It shows how important dialogue is for people who turn with their concerns to those from whom they are hoping for help or relief, cure or guidance.

III.

A third group merits our attention now – the scribes. In actual fact, they have nothing against Jesus. At least not at this point in time. They simply cannot make anything of his teaching. They think it is wrong theologically; indeed, even dangerous. They stand for pure teaching. The fact that Jesus is forgiving someone's sins here just does not fit in with their view of the world, and certainly not with their view of God. As Christian Morgenstern wrote so appositely: "because -- he trenchantly concludes -- things cannot be which must not be." There is a direct link between the roof that has to be opened up and the forgiveness Jesus imparts. Both events make "a hole in the sky." In the roof-sky. In the restricted horizon of those theological guardians of the law. The Gospel writers are silent about what the owner of the house may have thought about the act. But they do speak about the incomprehension of the experts. Every discipline makes progress thanks to people who attempt something new, who are prepared to "think outside the box". Whenever anyone tries something new, the alarm rings for the guardians of pure teaching. It is fundamental to our humanity. And as long as there are people, there will be those who strike out on new paths, and those who will try to block these new paths. It is always fear that motivates them.

The conflict is bitter where it is obvious that the old ways have served their purpose, yet the new has to be fought for. If I think of our Protestant Church, I am sometimes lost for words. Although it is in free-fall, the conservative forces remain strong; there is a struggle for new ideas and beginnings full of hope.

For that reason, the message of the resurrection is at the centre of Christian belief. It is what is radically new in the message of the bible. It is the assurance that life has prevailed against all the forces of negation and death.