

**‘The untimely therapist’**  
— or —  
**‘The healing of the paralysed man’**  
(Luke 5, 17-26)

We see Jesus here on his long road to Jerusalem, meeting people and healing their bodies and souls with the power of his words and actions (v. 17). This has consequences which go beyond the individual case in question. The healing of the leper (Luke 5, 12-16) had already caused such a stir that Jesus withdrew for a time to the desert (v.16). Now there are those who expectantly seek him out to ‘hear’ him and be ‘healed’ of their sickness (v.15). But there are also the sceptics and doubters who ask themselves whether everything this medically and theologically untrained ‘therapist’ is doing is as it should be; in particular, whether he is observing the accepted laws. In the end, these are the people who summon the relevant authorities to the scene.

So it is not surprising that “one day, as he was teaching” (v.17), there were Pharisees and teachers of the law among the crowd, there to ‘examine’ Jesus’ words. These were the particularly pious theoreticians and practitioners among the Jews of the time, whose opinions held sway on religious as well as medical matters (cf. Luke 5 v 14: “Go, show yourself to the priest...”). The importance these authorities put on a debate at this particular time with the ‘therapist’ from Nazareth is illustrated by the fact that they came from “every village” in “Galilee and Judea and Jerusalem”; the acts of Jesus had already gone beyond being just local events.

If we also take into consideration the many who had come in expectation of hearing Jesus’ message, it soon becomes clear that the house where Jesus speaks cannot contain the crowd. Those who are unable to get very close to the preacher must therefore find somewhere “at the back or outside.” Life punishes those who come too late.

This also seems at first sight to be the end for a group of men who want to bring a paralysed man to the sought-after ‘therapist’ and lay him before him (v.18), something they are unable to do because of the crowds who are already present. In desperation they climb onto the roof and pull away the tiling so that they can let the paralysed man down to Jesus by rope (v.19). They are disrupting the meeting! But what a trust (faith) that gives them the courage to handle situations using unorthodox measures; measures they certainly would not previously even have entertained in their dreams. How far are they prepared to go?

Then there is the paralysed man himself who, so that he can realise his wish for a cure, has to win over a group of men who share his conviction. He has to 'hand himself over' to these men and their spectacular methods. They were definitely not going to make themselves popular by damaging a stranger's house, by committing what, in the cold light of day, was a criminal act (!) They will also have to run the 'gauntlet of looks' which accompany the lowering of the paralysed man into 'pole position'. Anyone prepared to countenance these 'intermediate goals' must have a fundamental goal in mind they are pursuing. He has, first and foremost, to accept his 'helplessness' and his 'self-surrender', and in doing so overcome the sense of shame caused by it. In the end, those helping him participate in this by investing in the success of their enterprise. Jesus also sees 'their' faith (v.20).

A number of years ago, I myself was privileged to have the impressive and enduring experience of trust as the sine qua non for a doctor-patient relationship. My occupation, which more often than not bound me to my desk, had taken its toll on my back to the extent that I was finally driven to see a neurologist. Young, evidently competent and dynamic, he took the required pictures with the scanner available to him, to then comment on them with the blunt advice: "Find yourself a surgeon!" Neither the manner of this specialist in simply reeling off of his 'medicinal art', nor his suggestion of what to do, were persuasive. In my career I had tended to avoid making definitive decisions when weighing up the 'pros and cons' of an issue. And so I consulted a surgeon who was described to me as experienced. In a lengthy conversation he managed to ascertain my way of thinking, my attitude to life's vicissitudes, as well as my personal circumstances against the background of the medical problem; he was able to make me part of a viable decision-making process. I had found trust in him, though I had not met him before. Together we found a 'conservative' path, which helped me towards recovery and a cure without the surgeon's knife. I'm no longer in a position to judge whether the treatment I received from this doctor found adequate expression in his fee!

Let us return to those who were prepared to strip away the roof of a house like 'burglars' in their search for a cure. Given the trust that the paralysed man and his helpers place in being in Jesus' very presence ('under his eye'), we can't avoid feeling surprised initially that the 'therapist' they address neither asks what the patient wants (e.g.: Do you want to be healed?), nor offers any sort of assurance (e.g.: I'll help you, stand up!). Instead of which there are the consoling words: 'Friend, your sins are forgiven' (v 20). "Sin is lawlessness," as 1 John 3 v 4 expresses it by way of clarification, a disrupted relationship with God, to which Jesus here alludes without our need to know details about the previous life of the paralysed man. But on closer inspection it becomes clear that the 'therapist', in 'healing the underlying condition' (the forgiving of sins), has already created an important relationship of trust as a doctor with the paralysed man. This cure is predicated on the patient's inner conversion.

However, with his unexpected treatment, which is directed at the person of the paralysed man in its physical and psychological totality, the 'therapist' encounters resistance from the medical and theological expertise of those who have appeared to interrogate Jesus. For they are guided by the understanding, based on the precept: 'It is written', "Who can forgive sins, but God alone?" (v. 21). They are completely right in this. There can be no argument with the 'therapist' about this. God alone in forgiving sin can remove the "lawless condition" (Psalm 130 v.4 : "But with you there is forgiveness, so that we can, with reverence, serve you."). One cannot fail to see a certain tragedy in the fact that those who basically could and should at least ask Jesus more questions ("Who are you?"), given their extensive theoretical knowledge are, by pointing out that he is 'speaking blasphemy', stuck in their way of thinking and are shutting themselves off from further understanding from the very outset.

Yet Jesus does not abandon them to their gridlocked thoughts. He himself asks the question that they could critically have asked. "Which is easier: to say, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Get up and walk?'" (v.23). We would do well, in this context, not to lose sight of the fact that, according to Jewish understanding of his time, sickness and sin existed within a complex interdependence. Thus, the 'therapist' is effective in two

ways when he directs the words "I tell you, get up, take your mat and go home" (v.24) at the paralysed man. On the one hand, he is speaking to the paralysed man whose relationship with God has been transformed into a "lawful condition" through Jesus' pronouncement, as well as being liberated from the physical burdens of the past. As certain proof of the event for all those present, the man himself removes all evidence of his previous disability. For he stands up before their eyes, takes up his mat and goes home (v.25). On the other hand, it is an answer to his theological opponents present. The link between illness and sin (guilt) is dissolved; good tidings for many!

What is left at the end of this eventful day on which, before the eyes of various interested parties, a sermon has been given, a roof vandalised, a paralysed man lowered down on a rope, and a man healed in soul and body?

Our eyes fall first and foremost on the hitherto paralysed man, who has been helped on the road to a new start by the 'therapist' by his spiritual and physical healing; for this he praises God (v.25). We also see the people who recognise they had seen "remarkable things." But they are also "amazed", "praise" God and are "filled with awe" (v.26), which is for me rather an ambivalent condition. As close to the "hosanna" as it is to the "crucify him." And finally the Pharisees and teachers of the law. They remain trapped in their ideas. Or should I say: in truth, they leave the encounter with Jesus like paralysed men. The event reflects, in a timeless way, the spectrum of human reactions to a personal encounter with Jesus. Today, as in the past, the words "sola fide, sola gratia!" apply.