

## WHO NEEDS FAITH?

→ In the nineteenth century, as many of you will know, the greatest tightrope walker in the world was a man named Charles Blondin. He became the first person in history to walk on a tightrope which stretched for over a quarter of a mile across Niagara Falls. It's estimated that about twenty five thousand people from both Canada and America came from miles around to see this amazing achievement.

..... He walked across the rope which was suspended 160 feet above the raging water of the falls without a safety net or a harness of any kind, so one slip would have been fatal. It's no surprise then that when he safely reached the Canadian side of the falls there was a great roar from the crowd who were both amazed and relieved at his achievement.

.....In the days that followed Blondin walked across the falls many times – he did it on stilts, he did it in a sack, he crossed on a bicycle, he walked across in the dark and he did it blindfolded. He walked across giving a piggyback to his manager and he walked across wheeling a wheelbarrow full of cement. He is also reported to have walked across carrying a stove and a chair, stopping at the middle of the rope to cook himself an omelette!

.....On each occasion, large numbers of people gathered to see what amazing feat Blondin would perform next and they would “ooh” and “aah” as he walked across, one dangerous step after another. One day when he had walked across the rope pushing a wheelbarrow holding a sack of potatoes, he asked the crowd if they believed that he could walk the tightrope whilst pushing the wheelbarrow with a person sitting in it! The crowd enthusiastically responded and said, “Yes! You're the greatest tightrope walker in the world! We believe you can do it!”

.....”OK!” said Blondin. “Who will get in the wheelbarrow then and let me push them across?” As far as we know, no one did at the time! The people thronged to see what Blondin could do and they may have believed that he could do what he claimed, but when it came to trusting him with their own life it was a different matter!

→ Turn with me to Mark chapter 2, to the story of the healing of the paralytic which Pat used when the whole church family was together just a little while ago. Here we find an excited throng of people just like the crowd at Niagara Falls waiting for Blondin to walk the tightrope. People had gathered at this house, full of expectation and excitement because the word was out that Jesus was back in town. People were squeezing into every nook and cranny of the home and gathering outside too in the hope of hearing Jesus and perhaps witnessing something extraordinary too. By now people were well aware of Jesus' ability to preach and teach and heal so there was expectation, anticipation and celebration in the air!

.....The passage from Matthew which Ann read tells us that Jesus was moving around the area, teaching in the synagogues, preaching the Good News and healing everyone that was brought to him of all kinds of sickness and disease. “Jesus healed them all,” Matthew says. So, what does that say to us today when we know people who have not been physically healed despite our prayers or the prayers of others?

.....How many of you have been told that healing didn't come because you didn't have enough faith or that you weren't praying hard enough? How many of you or others that perhaps you know feel let down, or bitter or disappointed or angry because your prayers haven't been answered in the way you hoped they would be? How many of you feel that you have been misled or that somehow God isn't who you thought he was?

.....Maybe some of you are in that place today or you know others who are. If so, then I hope that what we discover as together we look more closely at this story today may help us to more fully understand "Who needs faith?" and where that faith needs to be placed in the context of a ministry of healing and wholeness.

→ Let's think first of all about the paralysed man himself. We don't know why he was in this physical state or how long he'd been like that but we do know that because of his physical state he wouldn't have been able to get himself to where Jesus was. We don't know whether he wanted to see Jesus, we don't know whether he asked his friends to take him or whether they offered, cajoled or even bullied him into being there. All we do know is that this paralysed man arrived at the house being carried by his friends and never once does Mark make mention of any faith on the paralysed man's part that Jesus could heal him.

.....He may have come believing that Jesus could heal him based on everything he'd heard about him. He may have been reluctant and yet been persuaded by his friends that it was worth taking the chance. He may have seen it as a last hope that he was somewhat sceptical about. We don't know whether this man had any faith at all. All we know is that he allowed himself to be brought into the presence of Jesus and there he was made whole, irrespective of any measure of faith of his own! Wonderful!

.....And what an encouragement that is to us to keep on praying for those friends and members of our family who may not have a faith of their own! Like these four friends who overcame every obstacle to get their friend in front of Jesus, we can bring our friends into the presence of Jesus through our prayers. God has made everyone of us and he is at work in our lives from the moment of our conception until the moment of our death, whether we recognise or acknowledge that or not – it's called prevenient grace. And often when people come to faith in Christ, they look back and see where God has been at work, in them, through other people, gently drawing them into a relationship with him where they are made whole. So, keep praying for your friends and family.

→ But does that then mean that the healing of the paralysed man was dependent on the faith of the men that brought him to Jesus? Is the health and wellbeing of friends that we pray for dependent on how much faith we have when we pray, because if so that's a huge responsibility isn't it? Well, look again at this story. These men certainly had faith. They were determined to get their friend close to Jesus. Determined enough to rip through the roof of the house to make it happen! And Mark even comments on the fact that Jesus notices how much faith these men have and it's then Jesus does something for their friend.

.....So, maybe those bringing people to Jesus do need faith! But what was their faith? Were they expecting a miracle? Did they truly believe that their friend would get up and walk again? Or did they simply trust Jesus enough to know that he would do something to make things better for their friend? The answers to those questions make a difference don't they? Why? Because when we pray we know that our prayers aren't always answered in the way that we might hope and it's very easy to feel guilty or to blame ourselves for that and to get drawn into this feeling that we haven't had enough faith or we haven't believed enough for the miracle to happen.

.....So, whilst it's right and good to pray for what we really long to happen, because God loves to hear us pour out what is on our heart, if we pray having faith that God is God, we can simply trust that God will work his purposes out in that situation, knowing that God's purposes are always good. We can have faith that God's will will be done in a situation even though it may not be all that we initially hope for. So when we pray for one another it's as if we are placing people in God's wheelbarrow and trusting that he will get them safely to the other side of the rope. It won't necessarily take away the bumpy ride on the way, but in God's hands all our friends and family are secure. We can have faith in that certainty. Our faith is not based on what we get. Our faith is based on who we trust!

→ Back to the story again to help us think that through a little more. Notice in verse 5 what actually happens. Jesus sees the faith of the men that have brought their friend and the first thing he says is "My son, your sins are forgiven." He doesn't touch him and heal his physical problems. He doesn't even mention his illness at this point but he goes straight to the heart of the matter and deals with what he sees to be the man's greatest need.

.....It may seem to us to be an odd way to begin the process of healing, but at that time the Jews made a connection between sin and sickness. They argued that if someone was ill, then they must have sinned, so no doubt that would have been in the mind of the paralysed man as he lay on the stretcher. And remember how last week you were reminded of the link between much of the suffering in the world and the fallen state of the human race.

.....So the first thing that Jesus does is reassure this man that God is not angry with him and that the relationship between him and God can be restored – he is forgiven! How much different he must have felt already, even before any physical healing comes his way. Jesus always meets the deepest needs of those who come to him. They may not be what we think they are but whatever changes take place in us will always be for our good.

→ So, having met the man's deepest need for forgiveness, Jesus then goes on to potentially change his life for ever. "Get up, pick up your mat and walk!" Jesus says. The man would have thought that impossible. He had probably not done that for some time, if ever. How could he do that now! But Jesus has the power to change things for us and in us. He offered this man a transformed life if he wanted it.

.....If he wanted it? Of course he wanted it didn't he? Or did he? If he was going to be healed, then he needed to actually do what Jesus said. He needed to

get up, take up his mat and walk. He needed to make that response and show that he was willing to see that change come about in his life. You see sometimes, just sometimes, there are some of us that say we want to be made whole or healed from something that has troubled us for some time, but actually deep down inside we're not sure that we'll be able to cope with life when things are different – but perhaps more of that next week! Suffice to say for now that when Jesus brings healing and wholeness into our lives, there is a need for us to live in a new way as a result of that change that he has brought about in our lives.

→ So, Jesus went all over Galilee, teaching in the synagogues, preaching the Good News about the Kingdom and healing people who had all kinds of disease and sickness. But I guess there were many in that part of the world who were never healed or made whole because they didn't come into the presence of Jesus or open themselves up to the possibility that Jesus might just be able to change things for them, just as there are today.

.....But we have the opportunity to pray for ourselves and to pray for others that we have care and concern for. Remember that connectedness that we have to one another that we thought about during the first week of this series. We are like the branches on the tree here at the front, all connected to each other and all connected to Christ who is the trunk or the stem. We have the opportunity to bring one another into the presence of Jesus as we pray for one another and of course we can ask for the things that we most long for. We do that in the knowledge that sometimes physical healing comes and sometimes it doesn't and there's no doubt that can often be hard to take. But the one thing we can have faith and absolute confidence in is that when we place our loved ones and ourselves in God's hands, he will work out his purpose in them and in us as we pray and he will bring about wholeness and fullness of life. He may not take away the bumpy ride or the hair-raising moments but he will always carry us safely to the other side of our troubles. We can have faith in him!