

LOUDER THAN WORDS

Matthew 8:1–4

This morning we're going to return to the chapter we looked at two weeks ago, Matthew chapter 8, and the first of the miracles recorded there.

Matthew gets through the facts in just four verses. Mark, who is normally very brief and to the point, actually gives us more information than Matthew. It's a short account but in it I want us to think about six contrasts.

1. Words and actions

In Matthew 4:23 we get a summary of Jesus' ministry here on earth. 'Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the kingdom, and healing every disease and sickness among the people.' Matthew lists three major elements: teaching, preaching and healing. Notice that two of those have to do with words and one of them has to do with actions.

Some people say it's what we do that counts, not what we say, but Jesus would not have agreed with that. We've already noticed the pattern of Matthew's Gospel: blocks of action and blocks of teaching side by side, and in this summary in chapter 4 verse 23, at least, words outweigh actions two to one, teaching, preaching and healing.

But having said that, Jesus *was* a man of action. What he preached and taught was backed up by his miracles and by his life.

The miracle we've just read follows the sermon on the mount, which takes up three long chapters of this Gospel. We don't read that people were bored. We don't read that people were disillusioned. This is what we read. 'When Jesus had finished saying these things, the crowds were amazed at his teaching, because he taught as one who had authority' (Matthew 7:28, 29).

There was authority in Jesus' teaching and it was backed up by a whole series of wonderful miracles, many of them in the area of healing.

Words and actions. Both are important. They're like the two wings of a plane. In Jesus they were absolutely consistent, in perfect harmony. What about us? How good is your oral hygiene? I'm not talking about brushing your teeth or visiting the dentist, though that does help. How clean is your mouth? Did your parents ever say to you, 'Wash your mouth out with soap and water'? If everything you've said last week were broadcast here this morning how would you feel?

And what about those actions, the places you've been, the things you've done, what you've read, the way you've reacted to other people? This morning God wants to give us a reality test. What is the result going to be? Reality or hypocrisy?

The second contrast is

2. The mountain and the valley

Verse 1. Although the NIV translates with the word 'mountainside' here, the slopes around Lake Galilee were hills rather than mountains. I'm no mountaineer. I got a bit queasy just standing on the pier at Whitby recently. But I love the hills. I particularly love the Lake District with its gentle rolling slopes and sparkling water. There's something about hills that lifts the spirit. The words of Psalm 121 are familiar. 'I lift up my eyes to the hills— where does my help come from? My help comes from the LORD, the Maker of heaven and earth.' There's something about hills that shouts the grandeur of God their maker.

In the Bible there are numerous occasions which we refer to as mountain top experiences. Hearing the sermon on the mount was certainly one of those. Challenging yet invigorating. Spiritual fresh air, far above the stagnation and pollution below.

Probably all of us can think of mountain top experiences, times when God seemed so near we could almost touch him, times when eternity seemed to break into our finite existence with the promise of something more. For many of us last Sunday was just such an experience. But it's not long before you have to come down to the valley, back to work, back to school, back to the world, back to the mess.

If that's what you're facing then be assured that Jesus has been there before you and Jesus will be there with you.

3. The crowds and the individual

In verse 1 we read about 'large crowds' but in verse 2 we are introduced to 'a man'. The Bible shows God's concern for the crowds. I think of the prophecy of Joel (3:14), 'Multitudes, multitudes in the valley of decision! For the day of the LORD is near in the valley of decision.' I think of that description of Jesus in Matthew 9:36 'When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.'

I think it was Abraham Lincoln who said, 'God must love the common man because he made so many of them.' Multitudes, large crowds, God loves them and sent Jesus to reach them.

But within every crowd there are individuals and each one is precious to the Lord. There have been many movements in history which have had to choose between the individual and the masses. In times of war, strategies are worked out on an international scale. Individuality becomes lost in the need for military success. The political ideology of communism puts the state before the individual. Multinational capitalist corporations make global decisions on the basis of profit, not the welfare of the individual.

But what stands out in this story is the individual. 'A man with leprosy came and knelt before him.' A man with leprosy, a danger to society. If he walked by, mothers would drag their children in off the street. A no-hoper, an outcast. Jesus didn't walk away. He didn't stand at a distance. He touched him.

There's a disease far worse than leprosy that affects each one of us as individuals. It's not something physical but spiritual. It doesn't deface us on the outside but on the inside. That disease is sin: selfishness, evil thoughts, hurtful actions, unkind words, lying, cheating. There's only one person who can deal with our sin and that's Jesus. Only he can make us clean.

4. Being able and being willing

Verse 2. 'A man with leprosy came and knelt before him and said, "Lord, if you are willing, you can make me clean."' This attitude tells us volumes about the needy man. He recognised that there was a difference between being able and being willing. We might have expected him to say, 'Lord, if you are able...' That would be most people's problem. There would be many who would have longed to be able to help him but they were not able, possibly his parents, other members of the family, his childhood friends, genuine Jewish believers with compassion in their hearts. 'We wish we could help you if only we were able.' But they were not.

What the man said to Jesus, however, was 'Lord, if you are willing, you can make me clean.' He called him 'Lord'. He knelt before him. He recognised that he *was* able. But he didn't take anything for granted. He wasn't presumptuous. He didn't just assume that

Jesus would be willing to help him. He said, 'If you are willing'.

Let's think about Jesus for a moment. Unlike all those other people, he *was* able. He had the power. And he was willing. Verse 3 'Jesus reached out his hand and touched the man. "I am willing," he said. "Be clean!" Immediately he was cured of his leprosy.'

As we come to Jesus in our need his power is the same today as it ever was but we cannot presume on his mercy. God is not a tap to be turned on and off by us whenever and however we decide. He may have other purposes which we don't know about.

We have certain promises. 'If you confess with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved' (Romans 10:9). Notice that within that promise there is a condition. Jesus is Lord. We can ask him for whatever we want but always with that proviso, that it is according to *his* will, not ours.

5. The law and the gospel

Jesus had some clear things to say about the law. We find them in this Gospel, chapter 5 verses 17 to 18. 'Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. • I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished.'

The law is God's standard of righteousness. We fall short because we cannot keep it in every detail. But Jesus fulfilled the law on our behalf. Peter tells us plainly, 'He committed no sin' (1 Peter 2:22).

Now here's a thing. Did Jesus keep the law, that is, the law of Moses, the Old Testament law? Let's check out the book of Leviticus. Chapter 5, a chapter that tells us various ways in which a person could become guilty. From verse 3:

³ If [a person] touches human uncleanness —anything that would make him unclean —even though he is unaware of it, when he learns of it he will be guilty. ⁵ When anyone is guilty in any of these ways, he must confess in what way he has sinned ⁶ and, as a penalty for the sin he has committed, he must bring to the LORD a female lamb or goat from the flock as a sin offering; and the priest shall make atonement for him for his sin.'

Now that's what Jesus did. He touched human uncleanness. So was he not guilty of sin, of defilement? If anyone else had touched the man with the skin disease they would have been guilty. The reason was that under normal circumstances something categorised as unclean would contaminate anything clean it came in contact with. Try this yourself. Put a piece of mouldy bread in the bread bin with some fresh bread. Go back the next day and see if the fresh bread has made the mouldy bread fresh or the other way round. I think you'll find that it's the mould that has spread, not the freshness.

That's the principle on which the law worked. It was given in the interests of health and hygiene. But when Jesus touched the man with leprosy a totally unexpected thing happened. Jesus was not contaminated. His touch brought healing. His cleanness passed to the unclean man, not the other way round. That's the difference between the law and the gospel. The touch of Jesus reversed the ordinary, natural way of things. It was extraordinary, supernatural.

6. The negative command and the positive command

Verse 4. 'Then Jesus said to him, "See that you don't tell anyone. But go, show yourself to the priest and offer the gift Moses commanded, as a testimony to them.'" The man was given two instructions, first, something he was not to do, then something he was to do.

'Don't tell anyone.' What a strange request. We find it again and again in Jesus' ministry. Why? Because Jesus had not come to be some kind of Uri Geller. His miracles were subsidiary to his preaching and teaching. He hadn't come to give free medical treatment. He hadn't come to lead a popular revolution against the Romans but to turn the hearts of the people back to God.

So what was the positive instruction? 'Go, show yourself to the priest and offer the gift Moses commanded, as a testimony to them.' Jesus had not come to abolish the law but to fulfil it. Without that certificate of health the man could never have entered back into society. And that's what Jesus wanted for him. He had come to give life and life in all its fulness.

Contrary to what many people think, Jesus did not come to take away life, to spoil our pleasures, to make us miserable. He came to give life in all its fulness: peace, joy, compassion, kindness, love.

Six contrasts, and perhaps the greatest contrast of all: before and after. Before meeting Jesus and after. Before: unclean, outcast, helpless and hopeless. After: life in all its fulness.