

John 4: 43–54 The Healing of the Official's Son

Last week we began a series looking at the 7 signs in John's gospel. The other three gospels show Jesus performing many more miracles, but John's gospel only has seven. But if you remember, we said that John included these seven signs specifically to build a picture about Jesus, who he is and what he has come to do, that leads to a saving faith. That's what he writes in chapter 20: *"these have been written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, and that by believing you may have life in his name."*

For John, the miracles are signs, clues if you like, that point to Jesus. And the 7 signs that John has chosen are significant in themselves. They each add something different to our understanding of who Jesus is and what it means to trust him. Last week at the wedding in Cana the big point was the overabundance of joy and blessing that is ours in Christ. John was showing us how good Jesus really is! And today we have a similarly important lesson about the nature of real faith. But there's also a clear warning not to be distracted by the signs themselves.

I don't know where you like to go for special days out, but there are some nice places around here. Judy and I had a wonderful day at Whipsnade Zoo a while back, and I want you to imagine for a moment that we shared that with some friends and they decided that it sounded so good they would go there themselves.

On the day in question they set off; bags packed, picnic ready, camera fully charged! It just so happened that later that day we found ourselves on the same road. But as we drove along and came to a sign which said 'Whipsnade Zoo: 10 miles' we noticed that our friends were having a picnic around the sign by the side of the road. The picnic rug was laid out, the chairs were set out, they were tucking into their food, there was evidence that they been playing some games as well and they looked like they were having a nice time.

Well, we were a little confused so we pulled over and asked them what they were doing there. "We're having a day out at Whipsnade Zoo!" They said. "Would you like to join us?"

Well were they at Whipsnade zoo? Of course not! They were gathered around a road sign! The sign might have animals on it, but they're not the real thing. And in the same way, there is a real danger that people can get so hung up on the signs, the miracles of Jesus, that they forget to see where the sign is pointing. The sign is noticed but they forget to see the significance of the miracle and so forget to come and trust in Jesus.

We'll come back to that in a moment, but let's refresh our memories about the incident itself.

After the wedding at Cana, Jesus visited Jerusalem where he taught and no doubt performed other miracles. On the way back, Jesus and his disciples travelled through Samaritan territory and Jesus had a long conversation with the Samaritan woman at the well. That conversation led to Jesus staying in the area for a couple of days with the result that many of the Samaritans believing that Jesus really was, verse 42, *"the Saviour of the world."*

Sadly, many of his own people couldn't see that. The region may have been buzzing with news of the exploits of the local boy made good, but they seemed to be much more interested in the signs than who they were pointing to. They hadn't yet been able to join the dots and see the significance of the signs. And sadly, some of them seem content to settle for what they have. They are picnicking by the side of the road rather than arriving at the proper destination.

So although the welcome seemed warm, it was really just superficial. The crowds had come to see Jesus because they wanted a show. They wanted to be entertained, thrilled, impressed. They were not really interested in who Jesus is or what the signs signified.

And it's that background which helps understand the way Jesus speaks to this worried father. Verse 46 tells us that the man was a royal official, probably from the court of Herod Antipas, the local Jewish ruler. He had obviously heard about Jesus' power and travelled some distance to ask Jesus to go and heal his son, who was close to death. Even if you've never been in a position where someone you love has been seriously ill, I'm sure you will be able to imagine how desperate this man was; so desperate he begged Jesus to help. So often we think that if we had more

money our lives would be free from pain and suffering and difficulty, but that isn't true. Wealth cannot save us from illness and pain and death. Those kinds of struggles affect the rich as well as the poor, the young as well as the old. This royal official had great wealth and status but he was utterly helpless to do anything to save his son.

Jesus' response seems rather curt and cruel in the circumstance doesn't it: *"Unless you people see signs and wonders you will never believe."* But the man was not put off. The life of his son hung in the balance and so he responded *"Sir, come down before my child dies."* But Jesus doesn't leave. Instead, he speaks. Verse 50, *"go"* Jesus replied, *"your son will live."* And the man took Jesus at his word and departed. I wonder if you would have done that? I wonder if I would have done that? But this man does – and the next day when he meets some of his servants on the way home they told him that the fever left his son at the exact moment that Jesus had spoken. No wonder, as verse 53 explains, that both the man and his whole household believed in Jesus.

It's a very short account, and in some ways a very simple story, but I want to try and unpack four important lessons for us this morning.

Firstly, we find a **warning not to be distracted by the signs**. For this man, the gathered crowds, and for many people today, the temptation is that our interest in Jesus is related only to what he can do for us. We get interested in the signs, but we're not interested in Jesus, not really, not at any deep level.

We see it at times of personal or national crisis where people who don't normally exhibit any signs of being a Christian come to the end of their own strengths and throw themselves on the mercy of God in prayer. I'm sure we can understand that can't we. Desperate times call for desperate measures, and when the chips are down people will try anything, including crying out to a God they don't really believe in. But in reality the people are interested in whether God can give them what they want, not in who He is or what they really need. The royal servant is like that, at least to begin with.

But often, like the crowds, people can be so blind to their real needs that they are simply content to be entertained rather than seek soul-cure we desperately need. It happens in other walks of life too: people buy the product which has the best advert, not the best spec. People vote for the politician who entertains rather than the one with integrity or the better policies. Many people go to a church which makes them feel good, where the message is affirming, where the music and the buildings are the most impressive, rather than the one which teaches the truth.

But just as we need to look past the froth and the nonsense when buying cars or stereos or choosing who to vote for or which church to attend, we need to look past the miracles and the signs themselves, to see the one to whom they are pointing. If Jesus is not front and centre in our minds then we have missed the point.

That's why Jesus responds as he does to this father's plea for help. He wants to provoke a response, to see what's in this man's heart, or more correctly, to let the man discover what is in his heart. Is he just like the crowd seeking entertainment, or is there faith there? Has he seen where the other miraculous signs have been pointing, or as he simply come to Jesus for what he can get? Where is your faith? Is healing all you want? Those are the questions behind Jesus' pointed response.

So let me ask you the same questions: why are you here? Are you here for the coffee, the singing, the welcome, the friendship? They're all nice things but they are froth and nonsense compared to seeing the one to whom all things we do point? Are you after some comfort, some relief, some help, or are you seeking Jesus? Hold your answer in your mind as we continue.

Secondly, we see **the importance of faith to receive what Jesus offers**.

Not long after Judy and I were married I entered a charity raffle where the top prize was a holiday. It was one of those multiple-choice general knowledge scratch cards things and I filled it in and promptly forgot all about it. Some months later I received a letter telling me that I had won the prize and asking me to contact them. The letter didn't look very impressive and Judy thought it was a joke. But it was just a local number and so I called and we ended up having a lovely holiday in Menorca as a result.

Why do I tell you that story? Because my faith in the promises that letter contained, small and guarded though it was, resulted in a really lovely holiday.

For the father in this account, faith was crucial. Jesus was not prepared simply to dish out miracles to entertain the crowds. Nor, actually, was he on this occasion prepared simply heal the sick boy without forcing the father to examine his soul. God is not a cosmic vending machine, dishing out goodies to those who ask. He is the author of life, the creator and sustainer of all things and his longing is for people to come and know him and not just enjoy his gifts. When this father turns up in the crowd and makes his request he obviously had some faith that Jesus could sort out this problem. But Jesus did not want him simply to receive the sign and nothing more; he wanted him to see the significance of the sign and to find that faith that would give him and his whole household eternal life, not just a temporary reprieve.

So Jesus probed deeper. His response was designed to poke the man down deep in his soul to see where his trust really lay. The man responded with yet another urgent plea; his real faith being revealed as he did so. And this time he gets an answer. *“Go, your son will live.”* It wasn’t the response the man wanted. He had asked for a personal visit, but he took Jesus at his word and went home. That’s real faith, right there. And we know what happened next.

To receive this gift of healing the man needed to trust Jesus. Faith was vital, and his faith revealed itself through action. Faith isn’t just a warm fuzzy feeling, cross your fingers, touch wood and hope for the best. Faith leads to action. This man believed, he took Jesus at his word and he went home. His faith in Jesus allowed him to receive all that Jesus had for him.

There are so many wonderful promises in the Scriptures about God’s forgiveness, his love, his presence, our welcome into heaven, God’s ability to shape our lives and to bring good out of even the most trying circumstances, but so often we fail to receive those blessings because we don’t have faith. And instead of trusting, instead of taking God at his word, we try and solve the problems ourselves. We try and make ourselves acceptable to God by our good works, we surround ourselves with more and more stuff because we think that’s where real peace is found. But God doesn’t work like that. If we want his greatest blessings, if we want him, then we need to trust him.

So let me ask you, what promises in the Bible do you doubt? Are you still trying to earn your forgiveness instead of trusting in Christ’s finished work? Does death terrify you because you doubt God’s promise of eternal life? Do you forget to pray because you doubt God’s power to change your circumstances? Faith is vital if we are to receive what Jesus has for us.

Thirdly, and more briefly, **the power of Jesus is not reliant on his physical presence.**

Jesus does not need to be physically present to bring healing. He simply declares that the boy will live and back at home, miles away, what he speaks is done.

This miraculous sign has wonderful news for us. None of us have ever seen Jesus in the flesh, and yet that does not diminish his power one iota. Distance makes no difference to the omnipresent Lord of creation because by his Spirit Jesus is with his people everywhere.

You see, when it comes to his will being done, Christ’s word is as good as Christ’s presence. And that means that we can rely on his promises at all times, in all places, in all circumstances. We may sometimes wish that Jesus would be here physically. We may sometimes, like doubting Thomas, hear ourselves thinking that we will not believe unless we see but seeing isn’t necessary. The world may say that seeing is believing, but with Jesus, believing is as good as seeing because Christ’s word is as good as Christ’s presence.

I wonder if you can accept that and trust that. And I wonder if you can see the hope and the peace and security that truth brings if you do. Jesus is just as able to transform your circumstances today as he was when he was walking the earth 2000 years ago. Jesus is just as able to forgive your sins today as he was 2000 years ago. Jesus is just as able to reveal his love for you, give you his peace, assure you of your eternal future, bring light into your darkness and put a song in your heart as much today as he was 2000 years ago when he was physically present.

That doesn't mean that every request you make will be answered yes with a resounding yes or that every single person you pray for will be instantly healed or that every problem will miraculously disappear. That wasn't the case even 2000 years ago. There were many in Israel back then who were not healed, many who died who were not raised, many who suffered who continue to suffer even though Jesus was walking through the land. It does mean that Jesus' power is undiminished and that because of his perfect wisdom and perfect goodness we can bring our requests to God in prayer and then leave the outcome with him. However our prayers are answered, the truth remains that the power of Jesus is not reliant on his physical presence.

Finally, **our faith grows as we trust Jesus.**

As we follow this account through what is abundantly clear is that this man's faith grows and deepens exponentially over just a short period of time.

He comes first as a worried father, looking for a miracle. He is forced to examine his heart and when he cries out again and pleads for Jesus to come you can sense that his faith is already stronger than it was before. That's apparent because when Jesus refuses to go with him and instead announces that the boy will live the man takes him at his word and sets off home. And how does verse 53 end? *"He and his whole household believed."*

I don't know how you would describe your faith today: weak, wavering, solid, steady, stable, I don't know what word you would use. I do know that the more you trust in Jesus the more your faith will grow. Just because you don't think your faith is very strong right now, does not mean that your spiritual life is blighted and your faith will never change. It does for this man, and it can with you.

And the 'how' isn't rocket science. This man heard the word of the Lord, accepted the word of the Lord, acted on the word of the Lord. That's how his faith grew!

Your faith will never grow unless you regularly spend time in the Scriptures, in prayer and with other Christians; that's how we hear and know God's word. Your faith won't grow unless you are willing then to accept God's word, the Bible, as true and authoritative. That means reading it humbly, even when they clash with our culture or lifestyle. And then you need to act on it and put it into practice. I know that's easier said than done, but faith always leads to action. I trusted that letter when I made the call to claim the prize. You showed you trusted your seat this morning by sitting down. You need to rest in God promises and obey them. That's how you show your faith. And when you do that, your faith will grow.

In the Bible we are encouraged to taste and see that the Lord is good. We saw that last week didn't we with the over-abundance of wine at the wedding. We see that here as this boy is brought back from the brink of death. We see that most perfectly on the cross as sinners are offered full and free forgiveness by trusting in the death of Jesus on their behalf. And all those who trust God entirely, who put their faith wholeheartedly in Jesus, discover that God's promises are true, that his love is real, that his life brings us life and that even when our prayers are not answered in the way we would wish, it doesn't matter because we still have Jesus – and having Jesus as our saviour, friend, brother and Lord is a far, far greater treasure.

Don't be distracted by the signs. Recognise who Jesus is, put your faith in him, obey him and receive all that he has for you. You will not be disappointed. Amen.