

1. Who is this man?

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Preacher: Andy Gemmill

[0 : 00] Let's pray together as we come to God's Word. We've just sung, Firm as a rock your truth shall stand.

We thank you, Heavenly Father, that your words are true and that the Son you have sent into the world is a speaker of true words.

And we pray now that as we read words about him and spoken by him, that you would please help us to take these words as they really are, the words of God himself, and to respond to them in our own lives in a way which befits the God who has spoken to us.

Hear us, we pray, in Jesus' name. Amen. I'd be very glad if you turn to John's Gospel and Chapter 5.

If you're following in one of the Bibles on the chairs, you'll find that on page 890, John Chapter 5. We're going to be in this chapter for the next four Wednesday lunchtimes, and I'm going to read the first section that really starts the whole chapter off, the miracle by the pool at Bethesda.

[1 : 31] I'm going to read to verse 18. After this, there was a feast of the Jews, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem.

Now there is in Jerusalem, by the Sheep Gate, a pool in Aramaic called Bethesda, which has five roofed colonnades. In these lay a multitude of invalids, blind, lame, and paralyzed.

One man was there who'd been an invalid for 38 years. When Jesus saw him there, and knew that he'd already been there a long time, he said to him, Do you want to be healed?

The sick man answered him, Sir, I've no one to put me into the pool when the water is stirred up, and while I'm going, another steps down before me. Jesus said to him, Get up, take up your bed, and walk.

And at once, the man was healed, and he took up his bed and walked. Now that day was the Sabbath. So the Jews said to the man who'd been healed, It's the Sabbath.

[2 : 37] It's not lawful for you to take up your bed. But he answered them, The man who healed me, that man said to me, Take up your bed and walk. They asked him, Who is the man who said to you, Take up your bed and walk?

Now the man who'd been healed did not know who it was. For Jesus had withdrawn as there was a crowd in the place. Afterward, Jesus found him in the temple, and said to him, See, you're well. Sin no more, that nothing worse may happen to you. The man went away, and told the Jews that it was Jesus who had healed him.

And this was why the Jews were persecuting Jesus, because he was doing these things on the Sabbath. But Jesus answered them, My father is working until now, and I am working.

This was why the Jews were seeking all the more to kill him. Because not only was he breaking the Sabbath, but he was even calling God his own father, making himself equal with God.

[3 : 44] It is not often in this life that you come across a genuinely fresh perspective on something familiar, something that makes you see things in an entirely different light.

Those light bulb going on in the mind moments, those eureka moments, don't come along very often. When you're a small person, of course, a child, you have them nearly every day.

Everything's new. But the older you get, the more infrequent they become. And so often, I guess it's true for most of us, most of the time, that life is pretty boringly predictable.

Not much changes. We don't think many new thoughts. And if that's true of life in general, it's certainly also true when it comes to thinking about God.

My own impression is that most people make up their minds in this country about God around the age of 10 or 11 and go through most of the rest of life thinking exactly the same things they thought when they were a child.

[4 : 53] Well, John chapter 5, where we will be for these next Wednesday mornings, lunchtimes, is magnificently different from the normal bored thoughts about God that we might have.

It's bristling with the unusual. I'm sure you'll find it refreshing. It all centers around and flows out from the episode that I've just read, The Healing at the Pool.

And because our time is short, we're going to get right into it. And I want to introduce you to five big surprises, a whole fistful of surprises in this episode, which I hope will stimulate and intrigue and whet our appetite for more of the real Jesus, as revealed in John chapter 5.

Five big surprises then. Here's the first. how like our own world the world of this story is.

We often, I think probably mistakenly, think of people who lived a long time ago as really primitive people. And things that happened a long time ago as being irrelevantly distant from us.

[6 : 08] Now, of course, you look at this passage, and there are real differences between then and now, are there not? For example, most of our towns and cities do not have a gate for sheep.

I do have a friend who's a freeman of the City of London. And as a freeman of the City of London, he has a number of privileges, including being exempt from bridge tolls while herding his sheep into the city.

Now, it is not a privilege, I understand, that he ever tried to exercise, and these days, if he did, he would have much bigger things to face than bridge tolls because things have changed.

Other things have changed. Organized religion, of course, is much less influential now than it was back then. None of us, for example, are likely to get into trouble for carrying our bed around on a Saturday, unless we're doing that in a particularly dangerous manner.

Health care has changed, has it not? Despite all the things we like to complain about about the health service, you don't usually see anything quite like verse 3 going on, do you?

[7 : 20] Not every day, anyway. A whole bunch of people lying around, waiting to be dipped in the pool. However, let me say, despite all the obvious differences, this is surprisingly like our own world.

Consider for a moment the inability of our own system to deal with people's biggest problems. It may not look like that these days, but anyone who's worked in a hospital, or a doctor's surgery, or a pharmacy, or a funeral directors, will tell you that the big problems of life, the really insoluble ones, are alive and kicking now just as they were back then.

And because of that, people will have a go at almost anything to make life better. Back then, if you can get into the water first, when the surface ripples, maybe you'll be healed.

These days, well, take your pick. The latest diet, the latest exercise program, or food supplement, or meditation scheme, or herbal remedy.

I wonder if you've come across ear candling, for an example. Anybody come across ear candling? The idea is that you stick a candle in your ear, specially designed, of course, and very expensive, and burn it, and it does good things for your health.

[8 : 45] It kind of, well, who knows what it does. Many things are claimed. I looked up the website of an expert in this, and was told that it stimulates lymphatic drainage, burns off excess mucus in the middle and inner ear, sinuses, and nose, increases the mobility and effectiveness of the white blood cells, and improves your immune response, and stimulates your pituitary gland, and so affects the whole body.

Let me ask you, which is the more superstitious? Get in the water first when the pool stirs? Or stick a candle in your ear and make yourself better?

Not much has changed, has it? Because the big problems of our world are still there. Here's the first surprise. How similar the first century world is to our own, even though we think we're so different.

Surprise number two. Well, surprise number two is the miracle itself. Forty or fifty years ago, of course, if I was speaking to you, the surprise would be that the miracle was in the Bible at all.

Such was the anti-supernaturalism of the middle of the last century that many people of my parents' generation found the miracles of Jesus frankly embarrassing.

[10 : 11] Of course, the truth is that my parents' generation was profoundly out of step with most of humanity in nearly every age. But that's changed, hasn't it?

We're increasingly familiar with the supernatural. We've seen more of the world. We've heard about and met well-educated people from all over the place for whom paying attention to the spiritual realm is really important.

And with more personal experience of the supernatural. I came across a person a little while ago who said this to me. there was an occasion in my life when I experienced for myself real

supernatural evil and at that point I realised it was stupid of me to keep on assuming that there was no God.

Now, the surprise for us is not the miracle itself. The surprise for us is the privacy of the miracle. Did you notice that? If I had an important mission to fulfil and a few miracles up my sleeve that I could pull out I'd be getting them out there for people to see.

Would you not? I'd be making sure that everyone was watching and everyone knew who I was and what I stood for and here I am doing the miracle. But look how it happens here. Verse 6. Do you want to get well?

[11 : 31] Says a man who wanders up. No introduction. No how do you do? This is my name. This is who I am. This is what I stand for. No, none of that. Just do you want to get well? Well, up you get then and off you go.

It's so straightforward. Excuse me. It's as undramatic as you could possibly imagine. No ceremony. No fuss.

And he melts away into the crowd as soon as the deed is done. There's no group of amazed people standing around gawping at what's just happened. Nobody's noticed apart from the one that it's happened to.

He doesn't even know the name of the person who's done it for him. Doesn't that intrigue you? Doesn't it? It's so not the way we would do things.

Do you think if Alex Salmon could do miracles he'd be keeping them quiet like this? Not a chance, is there? And that raises all kinds of questions.

[12 : 29] Who is this person who has this kind of power at his fingertips and wields it so self-effacingly? Who is he?

He's so not the stereotype of the powerful person or indeed of the religious leader. In our world anything out of the ordinary is bigged up as much as possible.

And so often we find there's hardly anything to it when we look and we hardly believe anything we hear anymore because we think everything's exaggerated. Here it happens on the quiet and in the end it cannot be hidden because it's so dramatic.

Isn't that intriguing and refreshing? Don't you want to know more about a person like this? He's different. Surprise number three.

The upset the miracle causes. Who gets upset? And what do they get upset about? You can imagine certain people getting upset about this kind of thing.

[13 : 32] The doctors they would be upset. Let me assure you as a former doctor I can say that with some confidence. The Palestinian Medical Association the PMA they'd be upset about this.

A genuine miraculous healer would be very bad for business. And let me say doctors are bankers in disguise. They're very concerned for anything that will be bad for business. But it is not the doctors who get upset here.

It's the religious people who get upset. And it's not the healing that bothers them. It's the day of the healing that bothers them. See these people are people who think that keeping their rules is very important indeed.

In the Old Testament law the Sabbath, our Saturday is a very important day. You had to take a break from the work that you were doing to remind you that there's more to life than working for a living.

And that God also took a break at the beginning from his work of creation. But these people didn't let anything remotely resembling work happen on the Sabbath.

[14 : 40] Keeping their Sabbath rules had turned into something very serious indeed. go to Palestine today and break the Sabbath and they will throw stones at your car as you drive past.

It's that serious even today. We'll find out later in this chapter that these rules have become a massive distraction from taking God seriously. Here we find out how impressive their system had become.

You can see fear in this passage can't you? A man who wants to divert the blame of his Sabbath breaking to the person who healed him.

You can see it in the fact that nobody seems to view the miracle as a wonderful thing. There are no whoa how amazing is going on in this chapter. religion can be very oppressive.

You may be here today as a person who's had bad experiences of oppressive religion in your own life and those things can make it very difficult to take a second look at Jesus for yourself.

[15 : 50] Well let me say if that's you take courage. Notice how Jesus deliberately provokes the religious mindset of his day. This man has been by the pool for 38 years.

He is not in need of an emergency appointment with the healer. He could wait till tomorrow or next week or next year. But he didn't.

Indeed in verse 16 it would appear that Jesus has done other things on the Sabbath as well. And I think we have to assume that he deliberately does things on the Sabbath.

to provoke people to stimulate people to think freshly. The real Jesus is a liberator not an oppressor. He may be self-effacing but he is not spineless.

He's deeply and deliberately controversial. Surprising isn't he? especially if you've experienced how oppressive human religion can be.

[16 : 58] Refreshing. Don't you want to know more about him? Next surprise. Number four. We're nearly there. And this one's easy to overlook.

It's in verse 15. Let me read it. The man went away and told the Jews that it was Jesus who had healed him. Why is that a surprise?

Well because it's a betrayal. Put yourself in the invalid's shoes. You're at the pool as usual. A man wanders up someone you've never seen before.

He asks you if you want to be made well. You say well how am I going to get into the water? I never managed it before. I've been here a long time. He tells you to get up. And amazingly you can.

No sooner has he told you to get up than off he goes. You're on your way home with your mattress. You get into trouble with the powers that be who don't like you carrying your mattress on the

Sabbath. They're pretty scary.

[18 : 02] You shift the blame to the man who healed you. They're very interested to hear about him but you don't know who he is. Later on however you meet him in the temple.

You have a short chat. And immediately after the short chat with the man who's delivered you from 38 years of sitting by the pool. You go off and tell those people precisely who he is.

Is that not surprising? Betraying the one who's made you suddenly amazingly well. This man has been off his feet longer than some of us have been alive.

How could he do that? Well I think the answer to that can only be it's because of the conversation in the temple. It's not a long conversation is it?

You're well again. Sin no more that nothing worse may happen to you. Now we don't know what was going on in this man's life.

[19 : 06] We don't know if his illness was because of his own sin or not. on the whole the Bible doesn't encourage us to draw direct lines between a person's particular sins and that person's particular sufferings.

We simply don't know anything about him. What is clear is that despite having been made well so wonderfully according to Jesus this man has an ongoing problem with sin that remains undealt with. Sin no more or something worse may happen. The fact that the problem remains undealt with is a much bigger issue in the end than 38 years of paralysis.

It's a big issue. Sin no more or something worse may happen to you. Again and again when Jesus meets people and talks to them he gets beneath the surface of their lives.

and keeps talking about what he says are the biggest issues sin and God's judgment on it. He keeps saying that those are the biggest problems that human beings face and he keeps saying that those are the core problems that he has come into the world to deal with.

[20 : 29] Now we'll learn more about that in weeks ahead but for the moment let's just focus on the shocking surprise of this betrayal. it seems that this man found the conversation more of an offense than he found his new mobility a joy.

Can you believe that? Isn't that a surprise? Despite the wonderful kindness shown to him he's either so indifferent to Jesus or so offended by him that he goes and tells on him straight away.

Often it's not so much Jesus' actions that cause offense in the Bible it's Jesus' words and that's certainly the case here. Surprising isn't it though that somebody could do this.

It says something about human beings that we could do this sort of thing in response to such kindness. Don't you want to know more about that?

Intriguing isn't it? Why it is that human beings are often so offended by the words of one so powerful and loving as this.

[21 : 40] It's intriguing isn't it? Finally, last but not least, the biggest surprise of all. Jesus' words in verse 17.

Let's just remind ourselves he's been accused, verse 16, of breaking the Sabbath. Let me read what he says. Verse 17. But Jesus answered them, My father is working until now and I am working.

Notice what he does not say. He does not say, no actually I haven't been working on the Sabbath. That wasn't Sabbath breaking.

Your rules are wrong. You ought to know your Bibles better. If you read your Bible better you'd understand that this was not Sabbath breaking, not working. Look at what he says.

My father is working until now and so am I. That's his answer. God works on the Sabbath, so do I. It's a bit like saying, yes I am breaking the Sabbath and I'm doing it because God the Father is a Sabbath breaker and I'm with him.

[22 : 54] That's what he's saying here. It's an extraordinary statement. A shocking thing to say. If you're not shocked by that as they were, they certainly were.

And they were shocked because they understood it. I am working on the Sabbath, says Jesus. And that is because the Father works on the Sabbath.

I'm just doing what he does. And that argument works all the way through this chapter. What I'm doing, I'm just doing because he does. Look what they understood by this.

Verse 18. This was why the Jews were seeking all the more to kill him because not only was he breaking the Sabbath, he's just admitted it, but he was even calling God his own father, making himself equal with God.

that's what they thought. That's what they thought he was saying. And of course it is what he was saying. And that's why they want to kill him. Intriguing, isn't he? So many things that are surprising when you come face to face with Jesus.

[24 : 00] He's so unexpected. He's so not what the religious person would invent. And yet he's wonderfully refreshing and exciting.

a person with an amazing voice. He speaks and behold it happens. A person who doesn't push himself forwards, yet can't be hidden because he's so spectacular.

A person who is not self-obsessed, yet becomes the very center of attention. And yet he's also perplexing. He's kind, but he talks about sin and judgment.

He's liberating, but he warns of disaster to come. People receive so much from him, but end up so hostile towards him.

Perplexing, isn't he? Those are such big contradictions. And I've left them open and answered this afternoon, because they're too big and too important to deal with in 20 minutes.

[25 : 07] Next week we'll be picking up where we left off. So why not come and find out more?

Don't you want to know more about this person? Intriguing, isn't he? Don't you want to know more about why human beings find him so difficult to swallow, despite his great kindness and goodness?

Intriguing, aren't we? Let's pray together. Now, my father is working until now and I am working.

We thank you, heavenly father, for this extraordinary story and the extraordinary one that it reveals to us. And we pray that not only this afternoon, but in the weeks to come, we might be intrigued, gripped, excited by, and eager to learn more of Jesus as he really is.

Hear our prayer, for we ask it in his name. Amen.