

Coming to Real Faith

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[0 : 00] Let's begin with a prayer. We thank you, dear Father, for the joy of coming together today to hear your word to us, that you will speak to us today in the middle of our weeks.

You know how many of us feel weary already, tired, as we plunge back into everything after Christmas and after the new year. So we pray now that your Holy Spirit will be at work in our hearts. Give us eyes to see Jesus. Show us the realities of the unseen world which we are normally so blind to. Lead us into all truth. Fill us with understanding.

And Lord, set our hearts on fire with love for you and for those around us. Fill us with the joy and contentment that come from really knowing you.

Bring order out of the chaos in our hearts, our minds, in our lives. And in a word, make us like Jesus, we pray.

[1 : 12] Amen. Amen. Now, we're going to read from John's Gospel. We're carrying on a series that we've been working on for a good six months now.

We're going to turn to John chapter 4 on page 889. That's page 889 if you've got one of the Pew Bibles.

John chapter 4. We'll be starting at verse 46. Just under the heading, Jesus heals an official's son. John chapter 4, verse 46, page 889. So he came again to Cana in Galilee, where he had made the water wine.

And at Capernaum, there was an official whose son was ill. When this man heard that Jesus had come from Judea to Galilee, he went to him and asked him to come down and heal his son, for he was at the point of death.

[2 : 24] So Jesus said to him, Unless you see signs and wonders, you will not believe. The official said to him, Sir, come down before my child dies.

Jesus said to him, Go, your son will live. The man believed the word that Jesus spoke to him and went on his way. As he was going down, his servants met him and told him that his son was recovering.

So he asked them the hour when he began to get better, and they said to him, Yesterday, at the seventh hour, the fever left him. The father knew that was the hour when Jesus had said to him, Your son will live.

And he himself believed, and all his household. This was now the second sign that Jesus did when he had come from Judea to Galilee. Now, there is no stereotype of Jesus that is stronger and harder to dislodge than the simple idea of gentle Jesus, meek and mild.

Though Jesus in particular, and in our modern culture, really, that is a Jesus there to offer me comfort and affirmation, affirmation for who I am and what I am, as I am right now.

[3 : 47] And the Jesus of reality, the Jesus we see in John's Gospel, is very different, rather deeper, more three-dimensional.

He is gentle, especially with the fragile and the broken. But at the same time, he calls every person who meets him to submit to him, to his judgment, and his evaluation of their lives before they can come to him for life.

Now, the story we've read today, it's quite a simple little one, but it is quite disquieting, almost uncomfortable. It's a story of a man who has a very shallow, superficial belief in Jesus, but who Jesus brings to real faith, real trust in him, and so through that to life.

And he does that by bringing the man face to face with himself, just in the same way he does with us today. You see, if you are to come to Jesus Christ, it means being brought to face to face by him with who you really are, with accepting his judgment on you.

And in the process of accepting that judgment, being given by him, the freedom from it that leads to life through trust in him.

[5 : 13] Now, before we really get into the meat of it, let's set the scene. Jesus has been in Jerusalem. He's done lots of miracles there. He's gone back through Samaria where the people accept him with great excitement and believe in him because of what they hear.

But his own people, the Israelites around him, particularly the people of his own country, really don't have any real belief in him. And that's what we see at work in this passage.

Jesus, verse 44, says, a prophet has no honor in his hometown, or as the NIV translation puts it, in his own country. And at the same time, verse 45, it says, the Galileans, that is the people of his own home country, did welcome him because they'd seen everything that he'd done in Jerusalem.

They'd seen the miracles. They'd seen everything, the spectacular acts that he'd done. And they had been impressed. They wanted this guy to be here with them.

So what on earth does Jesus mean by saying he has no honor there? Well, this is the end, the closing piece of a section that started back at the end of chapter 2 in verse 23 to 25.

[6 : 33] At that point, just a page earlier, really, Jesus, we see, many believed in his name when he did all these miracles. But Jesus, it says, did not entrust himself to them.

because there's a kind of false faith at work, a kind of faith that isn't faith, a faith in a slot machine Jesus who provides what you want when you want it, but doesn't confront or change you in any way.

And in this passage, we're seeing that at work again. Here's a man with the faith that's not real faith being brought to the true faith that leads to life. So firstly, 46 to 47, we see a man coming to Jesus with a worldly need.

This is a story of a man with an important need, a good need, a real need, but one that, though he brings it to Jesus, must not be mistaken by us for a real faith in Jesus.

This man is someone unlike anyone we've met before in the gospel. He's an official, verse 46, probably working for the minor king Herod Antipas. So he's working for quite an unreligious, worldly, wealthy court.

[7 : 52] He's a successful man, probably part of the 1%, but tragedy doesn't leave the rich and the successful alone any more than anyone else. And his little son is sick.

He's at the point of death, verse 47. And he hears that the healer, Jesus of Nazareth, is up the hill in Cana. It's only 17 miles away.

And he's seen or at least heard everything that this man has done. He knows that this man can do a miracle. So he knows that if there is any hope for his son, it's his and this man.

So he heads over to Capernaum, doubtless rushing, doubtless full of fear and worry. And when he gets there, he asks Jesus to come down to Capernaum where he lives.

Come and heal my son. And that is a picture, isn't it, of someone with a spark of faith. He knows Jesus can do something for him. It is, at the same time, a little faith.

[8 : 50] He thinks Jesus is going to have to walk over with him back to his hometown to do this, put his hands on his boy and make him well. It's very unlike another story you may remember over in Matthew chapter 8 where a centurion comes in a similar position with a sick servant and says to Jesus when Jesus offers to come to his house, no, no, I'm not worthy of that.

Just say the word and it'll be done. This is the diametric opposite of that. Jesus can't, sorry, this man can't see Jesus' power and he doesn't have any deeper belief.

All he sees is a man who can make his son better. He can do more than the doctor, certainly, but he doesn't see anything of Jesus' claims in his life or his promises to those who come to him.

That's like an awful lot of us most of the time, isn't it? We come to Jesus very often in life initially with requests that are just as shallow or rather an awful lot shallower a lot of the time than this man's request for his son.

We want a simple answer to heartfelt prayer. You know, good things, important things, but health in sickness perhaps or to put our lives back together or an answer to prayer for someone near us.

[10 : 10] But in the process we're really putting Jesus at our service for the needs we see and we feel. I think of my dad, actually, a man who for years and years was fairly contemptuous of the Christian faith and was so all the time I was growing up and the moment that really made him first start to think about faith was a moment of desperate prayer for my brother who was in real trouble at the time.

He didn't come with any deep ideas about Jesus. He came with a simple need which led somewhere quite different as we'll see with this man. We spend so much time, don't we, thinking about our sicknesses, our aches, our pains, our troubles, our work colleagues, about the challenges of parenting and the challenges of Jesus' life and ministry and what he means are so far away from us.

But the wonderful thing is that Jesus does have compassion on this man and he has compassion on us too. He has a double compassion. He has compassion in the needs we have now. But he also has the love for us that is willing to shock us out of our little bubbles of self-concern and to take us deeper, to open our eyes to who he really is and what he can really do for us that goes so much deeper.

And that's what we see in verse 48 through to 50. See Jesus like a doctor for the human soul, giving him strong medicine but medicine that works.

And it's the part of the passage that shocks us. This is a man who is concerned with the death of his son. Surely this is someone to be compassionate to. Jesus says to him, unless you see signs and wonders you will not believe.

[12:10] Interestingly he's not just saying this about the man he's speaking to. A lot of other versions of a little footnote here that point out that the word you is use. He's talking to you Galileans, all you people around.

Unless you see signs and wonders you will not believe. Now we've got to ask ourselves what has this got to do with this man? Why is Jesus saying that? This man is not coming asking for proof to believe in Jesus.

He's not saying do a sign so I can believe you. He's coming in real desperation. But Jesus doesn't mess around with the problems of the human heart.

He's also one to quickly burst the bubbles of the proud, the rich, the self-satisfied in it. Maybe that's what's happening here. We've got a rich official who's telling this little village rabbi he needs to cancel his weekend plans and come to my house pronto.

Perhaps. But really what he's saying is this. Look, you don't really trust me. For you seeing is believing. Even for me to heal your son, you think you need to take me all the way to your home and get my hands on his forehead.

[13:19] it. You've seen I can heal, but you haven't looked past that to see what it means. You haven't listened to my teaching to discover who I am.

You haven't even considered the deeper problems I've come to solve. You are concerned about your son's life, rightly. But what about your son's future?

What about his eternity? What about yours? What about yours? Have you really thought about what these signs mean? What they can mean for you and for your family?

Because this man is right now face to face with God's power breaking into the world. And so Jesus faces him with words that are a judgment, an accusation.

They're saying you're blind to what God is doing right in front of you. open your eyes. He's asking Jesus to exert power that can save from death itself, the last great enemy of humanity.

[14:29] And in the next chapter, in the next couple of weeks, we're going to see how that power goes so far beyond rescuing from a fever. How Jesus is here to meet needs that go so far beyond life, sicknesses, and foods, needs, and all of that.

He's here to bring us all new life, life that lasts forever, life that brings us into the kingdom of God. And this man needs to open his eyes to that. And to do that, he needs to come to terms with himself, with his blindness, with his self-absorption.

If he's going to be able to be rescued by Jesus, he needs to open his eyes. life that is but the medicine Jesus has chosen is just right.

And the official, he might be important, but he doesn't bluster, he doesn't make excuses, he doesn't go away. He speaks a bit more respectfully now. He says, sir, come down before my child dies.

And to that, Jesus responds with real compassion, go, your son will live. He's saying to this man, you wanted to see the son, you wanted me to come and put my hands on him in front of you, but I can give you what you want and need right now with just a word.

[15:55] Go, your child will live. And so he's asking this man, trust me, trust my words have the power to do this. It might be 17 miles down the road, but my word can do this right now.

And then in verses 54, we see how 50 to 54, Jesus brings the man through from a partial faith to real trust. The man does trust Jesus' words.

He believed the word that Jesus spoke to him. He went on his way. But that isn't the end of the story. He's heading home, he meets his servants and they tell him, it's okay, your son's getting better, he's going to be okay.

And he asks, as we all would in that situation, when he started to get better, and they answer, the seventh hour. Now they counted from dawn usually rather than for midnight, so that's roughly 1pm. he knew that was the moment, the time when he had been standing face to face with Jesus in Cana, when Jesus had said, go, your son will live.

[16:58] It was at that time that the fever left him, the fever that had been going to kill him. And it is in that moment he really sees the power of Jesus' words. He is faced with evidence that he cannot deny.

It's not just that Jesus can pray from the beginning of a recovery. No, he speaks and the fever goes. Jesus' words have the same authority, the same power as God's did in the Old Testament, right back from the beginning of Genesis.

The words that do what they command in the moment they command it. And so he believes. He and his whole household, it says, verse 53, believe.

And of course this isn't the simple belief that he'd had in some words of Jesus in verse 50. Now he really believes in Jesus. He sees this is the one whose words bring life and hope.

Now I wish here in this story it told us a little more about what that meant, what he saw, what he understood about Jesus at that point. But we know already from John, even if we just look back to verse 42, a little of what it means.

[18:14] we know indeed this is the saviour of the world. He could see, in other words, what John means by belief is that they can see that this is the one who fulfills God's promises to rescue in the Old Testament.

This is God's king, the life giver, the one on whom our hope for eternity rests. Now, as we come to a close, this is a strange little story, isn't it?

It is quite disquieting. You know, if someone came to us saying, my child is about to die, can you do something? This is not how we would answer. But when we look at it closely, we see Jesus better, because we see how he can understand every human heart.

He sees this man and what he needs, and he sees you too. He knows what you need, too. Not always what you want to hear, not always what I want to hear, but what we need.

And when we come with our needs and with our little faith, it's often very little, isn't it? He doesn't leave us there.

[19:22] He's kind enough, merciful enough, that he cares not just for our needs, but to bring us in his kindness all the way to the real solid faith that depends on him and receives from him a gift of life for the future.

This story tells us what real faith is. It isn't just looking to Jesus to fulfill our needs. It's not projecting that kindly father figure of the new atheists into the sky.

It's also not illogical. This man believes because he sees evidence, which is why we're reading the eyewitness document of what Jesus did. But real faith starts with what this man did.

It starts with accepting Jesus' judgment on us. Realizing we're not the one sitting weighing the evidence as if we were in court and Jesus was in the dock, but rather the other way around.

We accept his judgment on us and rather than that being the start of guilt and weight and struggle, that is the door to life and hope.

[20:35] To accept his judgment saying we're not worthy. Our faith is weak, it's false just like this man's. When we admit that, we open ourselves to receive from him the gift of forgiveness, of life, of hope, which John's gospel has been talking about from the start.

The gift, John one says, of being adopted as God's children. This man went home with new hope for this life because his son was alive, but for the next as well, with his whole household depending on Jesus for life.

As I said, my dad, about ten years ago now, found himself desperately praying in the middle of the night for my brother, simple need. Before that, he'd had not just no faith, but a real contempt for Christian faith, for what Jesus stood for.

but when he came with that need, when he really came with that need, he discovered a Jesus who spoke to him, who showed him through his word what he really was, and a Jesus who promised far more than he had come and prayed for.

And like so many down the years, he discovered a Jesus who makes life far more worth living, than he'd ever realized before, who offers a hope that will not die, that no sickness can take away.

[22 : 16] And he still knows that. And so can any of us, if we will come to Jesus for the same. Let's pray. Lord Jesus, may we who come to you with very weak faith know you more and more each day, and being strengthened in our faith by you, grant that we may at last behold your glory face to face through Jesus Christ, your Son, our Lord, who is alive and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

Amen.