

21/7/13

GSM

James 5:13-20, Mark 2:1-12

[read]



Does anyone speak Welsh? Then you will know what's wrong with this picture. Here's the story from the BBC website:

Swansea council got lost in translation when it was looking to halt heavy goods vehicles using a road near an Asda store in the Morrleston area.

All official road signs in Wales are bilingual, so the local authority e-mailed its in-house translation service for the Welsh version of: "No entry for heavy goods vehicles. Residential site only".

The e-mail reply duly came back and officials set the wheels in motion to create the large sign in both languages.

The notice went up and all seemed well - until Welsh speakers began pointing out the embarrassing error.

What the e-mail response to Swansea council had said in Welsh was: "I am not in the office at the moment. Send any work to be translated".

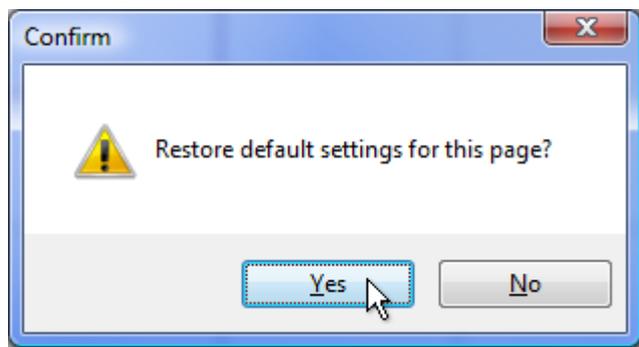
So that was what went up under the English version which barred lorries from a road near a supermarket.

"When they're proofing signs, they should really use someone who speaks Welsh," said a local journalist.

Coming to this passage this morning I feel a little like that council who go the road sign wrong, in that I'm not 100% sure what the passage means, and the translation I am providing you of it may well be wrong. In fact in preparing this sermon I've broken one of my golden rules, which is to never listen to another sermon, or read another sermon, on the passage you're preaching. Otherwise there's a risk that you rely too much on someone else's thoughts and interpretation. Here, I've listened to 6 sermons from churches I trust – from John Piper, from Tim Keller and two each from All Souls and St Helens. And each church has a different take on this passage. So, I've thought hard and have come up with what I think this passage means. If you disagree, then it may well be that you're in good company. Now part of the reason I did that is because I know some of us are struggling with serious illness, or have struggled with serious illness, be it physical illness or mental illness. Others of us have seen members of our family do so. For those people, this passage may be particularly important. If I get this passage wrong then I run the risk of either giving you false optimism or pessimism, which is more harmful than I if get it wrong when I'm preaching on less controversial topics. I don't take that lightly.

Let's move on. What we see here are two key things:-

- The default setting for the Christian; and
- God's different priorities.



So, this passage in James tells us the default setting for the Christian. Verses 13 and 14: **13** Is anyone among you in trouble? Let them pray. Is anyone happy? Let them sing songs of praise.**14** Is anyone among you sick? Let them call the elders of the church to pray. Verse 16: Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed.

What James expects is that prayer infuses every part of the life of the disciple of Jesus. If they're in trouble, they pray. If they're in a good place, they pray. If they're sick, they pray. In every situation, James expects the follower of Jesus to be speaking with God, praising him for the good times, asking for relief in the bad times.

I think we take this for granted but don't really follow it through. There's a risk we become a "seasonal" prayer – praying every now and then, when we have something to pray for. The Bible says that prayer should be a constant state in our lives – always speaking with God. How are we doing on that score? What activities do we prioritise in this church? Maybe not the prayer meeting. When we started the men's group we decided that we would meet every week save one per month when we would attend the prayer meeting, and that's what we've done. Why? Prayer is important. It focuses our attention on God. We believe as Christians that we are dependent on God and prayer is like people who need water drawing on the well. How often do we make time for prayer? When is your regular prayer time in the day? Failing to pray is like having a source of fresh water and deciding not to drink.

But none of us are going to be moved to change our habits around prayer by being made to feel guilty about it. The only reasons we will pray is if we understand why God calls us to pray. And this passage tells us two things about prayer. Firstly, that God wants to listen to us and secondly that God works through our prayers. So, God wants to listen to us. Can we just stop there and think on how amazing that is? Contrast it with other situations. Some of you may have worked in organisations that operate what they call an "open-door policy". This usually means that no-one is allowed to close the door to their room unless they're in a private meeting. But try putting it to the test with a member of senior management. Try going uninvited to a senior director and asking him about your complaints about the standard of food in the firm canteen. See what sort of response you get – usually you're not invited in for a cup of tea and a biscuit, put it that way. And yet God, the creator of the universe, the Alpha and Omega, wants us to speak with him and approach him and bring our joy and tears to him. That's an amazing access to the most powerful being in the world.

And not only is God powerful, but he intervenes in the world as a result of our prayers. Look at verses 17 and 18: "Elijah was a human being, even as we are. He prayed earnestly that it would not rain, and it did not rain on the land for three and a half years.¹⁸ Again he prayed, and the heavens gave rain, and the earth produced its crops." Look in particular at the beginning of verse 17 – Elijah was a human being, just as we are. James is making the point that the reason that Elijah's prayer was effective is not because he himself had any special power to bring about this amazing outcome of God drying up the rain, but that he was able to call on the one who was. That's the power of the God who invites us to pray to him and intervenes in the world as a result of our prayers. Do we get that? If we do, we'll pray. If we don't pray, maybe we don't get that. We need to get that. It's a simple thing to understand. Let me say it again: God invites us to pray to him and intervenes in the world as a result of our prayers.

All the sermons I heard from the various different churches agree about that. That's the easy bit! What they disagree about is the bit about prayer for healing, and I want to spend most of the time on that because there are plenty of passages in the Bible on prayer but relatively few about prayer for physical healing. It's an area that has immediate relevance to us but is also surrounded in mystery and misunderstanding. A while back I bought a book on prayer by Philip Yancey and here are some of the things he says about the frustrations of prayer for physical healing and the damage that the wrong expectations may create: *read extract from page 240.*

But the thing is, we hear the bit about Elijah and the huge miracle that was produced. We hear about little Isobel Fox and the amazing story of how her digestive tract grew. We read the bit in our passage in James that says "Let them call the elders of the church to pray over them and anoint them with oil in the name of the Lord. **15** And the prayer offered in faith *will make them well*". And you think – then *why not me?* We may feel like someone who responds to an advertisement for some consumer goods only to find they're nothing like as impressive as the advert had you believe because they didn't present the full picture, or because 'terms and conditions apply'.

Well, here's my take. Let's start with what I *don't* believe it means.

- I don't believe that all Christians who pray for healing will receive the healing that they long for. That's self-evident from the fact that the proportion of Christians who have died is no different from those who do not follow Jesus. Many of those will have prayed in their distress for healing, or had others pray for them. Some have been very high profile – David Watson was a very high profile Christian leader in the 70s and 80s and was diagnosed with terminal cancer. He was prayed over and anointed with oil. He died.
- I don't believe that when Christians who receive prayer and anointing don't experience physical healing that it's because of lack of faith on the part of the person themselves or those praying for them. Mark 9 tells of an encounter between Jesus and the father of a boy possessed of an evil spirit. The father says "if you can do anything, take pity on us and help us." "If you can?" said Jesus. "Everything is possible for one who believes." Immediately the boy's father exclaimed, "I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!" And *that was enough*. Incomplete faith. Not huge faith which requires everyone to be super-spiritual. Jesus said elsewhere that faith as small as a mustard seed can move a mountain. *Having faith* is key – I don't believe that the quantity of it is.
- Finally, I don't believe that there is anything particularly magical about the oil and anointing. From what I've read the oil represents something and provides something. What it represents is the Holy Spirit – in the Old Testament kings were anointed with oil to represent that they were chosen by God. What it provides – or I should say what it provided in those days – was medical intervention. Think back to the story of

the Good Samaritan - if you remember what the Good Samaritan first did when he rescued the traveller beaten up by thieves , it was pouring wine and oil on his wounds. Using oil on patients was the equivalent of cutting edge medicine in those days. So we might therefore say that this is a good example of the Bible saying that God works through, and alongside medical intervention. In James 5, the elders pray, and offer medical intervention.

What I do believe that this passage shows us is God's priorities for our lives, which are often different to our own priorities for our lives.



This is where we turn to Mark 2. One of the most famous healings that Jesus performed which is recorded in the gospels. Now, what do you think of when you think of that story? That Jesus healed a man of his paralysis once he was let in through the roof? But look at the details. Someone is lowered in through the roof. Then look at verse 5. Jesus turns to him and says “your sins are forgiven”. Now what do you think the man or his friends would have been thinking at that stage? That was doubtless not the reason that they came to see Jesus. Their immediate concern was that here was a guy healing people of physical infirmity, they had a friend with paralysis, let's get him before Jesus. They may have heard Jesus's words about forgiving sins and thought “You've missed the point – we're here so this guy gets to walk, not so sins are forgiven.” But initially at least Jesus doesn't do anything about his paralysis - he has other priorities. He sees that the most important thing for the man was forgiveness for his sins, not physical recovery. *Only when the teachers of the law question*

his authority does he heal the man physically and he only does that, verse 10, so that they know that Jesus has the authority to forgive sins. Jesus's priorities were the man's forgiveness of sins, and that those in attendance might know that he had authority to forgive sins. The man's physical healing was incidental.

Jesus's priorities were different from the priorities that the paralysed man or his friends would have had if their primary focus had been on physical healing. Does that give an indication as to why we don't see miraculous physical healing on a regular basis? Physical sickness and healing is mentioned three times in the James passage, in verses 14, 15 and 16. *Spiritual* sickness and the need for forgiveness is mentioned alongside those references to sickness, in verses 15, 16, 19 and 20. The signs are that God sees our need for forgiveness and spiritual restoration as the key thing for us. That's not to say that we are to ignore our sickness when we pray – we are told to pray for each other when sickness occurs and we are told to call on the church leaders to pray for us when we are in need of it because of sickness. But God may have different priorities.

Maybe the key to us understanding the passage in James is in verse 14 – the leaders are to pray and anoint *in the name of the Lord*. Now that's a well-used spiritual phrase, but consider – what does it mean to do things in someone else's name? Well, I often have the responsibility of doing things in someone else's name – in the name of my employer. At work, when I'm dealing with people outside my employer, I represent my employer. The things I do are in my employer's name, not in my personal name. When I sign contracts I do so not in my own name but in the name of my firm. Now, that gives me authority. Let's take an example. My firm offers lunches for its clients, and so has to deal with food suppliers to its client kitchens. If I am dealing on the contracts for one of the food suppliers to our client kitchens, then I know I can negotiate prices and terms for the grocer, or butcher, or wine merchant. I know that if I was to speak to those same suppliers to get some lamb chops for my tea, I wouldn't get the same deal. I am able to do more in my firm's name.

But equally I know that when representing the firm I am responsible for upholding the values that the firm has. If I get into an argument in the supermarket with someone when I'm doing my family's weekly shop, it only reflects on me. If I get into an argument with a client or a supplier on my firm's business then it reflects badly on the firm. Which means I adjust the way in which I behave when I'm doing things in my firm's name. I know what my firm wants to achieve and I don't ask for things which aren't in line with the firm's values and objectives.

In the same way, when we say we do something in Jesus's name we need to understand what his values and objectives are, because we are doing things in his name. And what do we see from Jesus's life? What are his values and his objectives? We can see these in his prayers when he has trouble – the most intense and clear example of this is when Jesus prays in Gethsemane before he is led away to die. Do you remember his prayer? 'Take this cup from

me, but not my will but yours'. He came to God knowing he was powerful, asking him to intervene in his power, but trusting in his sovereignty and goodness, which God showed. But God's goodness was shown through Jesus's suffering, not through saying yes to his prayer.

There's another good example in the New Testament when the apostle Paul prays that something he refers to as a thorn in his flesh is removed. Paul prays repeatedly, but is told no because God's power is made perfect in Paul's weakness. See how God had a different priority to Paul. So when the elders pray for the sick person in the name of the Lord, here are the values and objectives of the Lord.

Philip Yancey makes the point in his book that God did not design this planet as an arena in which to demonstrate natural law-bending skills, much as we humans may crave that at times. Mainly, God wants to relate to creatures personally, to love and be loved. Compared to Old Testament stories of miracle and triumph, this seems a bit weak. We want to see things like the parting of the Red Sea, the walls of Jericho falling and widow's sons being brought back to life. And let me be clear – the Bible tells us to pray for God's intervention and commends those who pray in faith for God to move miraculously. I do this every week, praying for healing for those I know. I know that God does intervene and has the power to intervene. I am confident that if it is within his plan, he *will* intervene. And yet the New Testament shows the normal gospel pattern, which is that of gradual and patient transformation – the kingdom of heaven is like a planted mustard seed that starts small and hidden, but ends up big. The kingdom of heaven is like yeast in bread that gradually transforms its surroundings. The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden away in a field that requires someone to give up everything to purchase. The kingdom of heaven is like a man who suffers torture and death and is raised to glory. This is the pattern of the disciple – as we heard last week from Vincent, it is the path of patient endurance.

So we're called to pray, and to pray for specific things, including healing. And when Jesus taught us in the gospels how to pray, he taught us to pray to God as our father – our father in heaven. We are called to trust in God *as our father* - that when God does not seemingly answer our prayers, or answers them in a different way from what we want, that we should trust that as our father he has our best interests at heart and is at work to change us and make us more like Jesus. When God doesn't intervene in the way we would wish, hard though it is, we are called to trust that his priorities for us are perfect and those of a loving father.

Pray