

Jesus at the Centre of Scripture – John Chapter 5

Jesus had healed a man who had been lying by a pool in Jerusalem called Bethesda – a man who had been an invalid for 38 years. Jesus told him to pick up the mat he had been lying on and walk, walk away from the pool, and he did so. A simple word of command from Jesus gave life to limbs that had been 38 years lifeless.

But it was the Sabbath day when this man was healed; the Sabbath day when he walked through town carrying his mat; the Sabbath day as he walked towards the temple, perhaps for the first time ever.

The Jewish leaders soon spotted him and were greatly annoyed. “You are breaking the law” they accused him. The man told them that he was carrying his mat because he had been healed of his paralysis and that the man who had healed him had told him to take his mat and go. Eventually, when the Jewish leaders discovered that it was Jesus who had healed the man, they wasted no time in finding fault with *him*. We read in verse 16, “So, because Jesus was doing these things on the Sabbath, the Jews persecuted him.” The remainder of the chapter is devoted to Jesus response to this accusation.

At the heart of Jesus’ response are his words in verses 39-40, “You diligently study the Scriptures because you think that by them you possess eternal life. These are the Scriptures that testify about me, yet you refuse to come to me to have life.”

I once preached a series of sermons on Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians. I must have focused on the many things that the Corinthians got wrong – their divisions, their desire to make a big impression on others, their tolerance of immorality and so on. One of the children asked me, “What did the Corinthians get right?” So I preached a sermon on what the Corinthians got right – in their case that they had believed in Jesus. So also, regarding these Jewish leaders, I want you first of all to see with me...

What these Jewish Leaders got right

Jesus says to them, “You diligently study the Scriptures.” This at least they got right. Not only did they study the Scriptures, they were diligent in their study of them. Moreover, they studied them because they believed that they contained the key to eternal life. In this, they had got it spot on. Jesus is not criticising them for their study of Scripture: for this they were to be commended.

What, then, had they got wrong?

Not long ago we were on holiday in North Cornwall. From our bedroom window we could look out over the rolling Cornish hills. But one morning, when we awoke, we could not even see the end of the garden. A sea mist had drifted in and we could not see the field beyond the garden, much less the hills beyond that.

It was a bit like that with these Jewish leaders. Their own views and their understanding of themselves acted like a mist (or veil as Paul later terms it), that prevented them seeing what was there. It blinded them to what was right there before them in the Scriptures they were reading.

These views were something like this:

- i) We are God’s chosen people. We are the children of Abraham to whom God promised blessing and this land. We are the people to whom God gave a kingdom in the time of David and Solomon and with it a promise that this kingdom would never end.
- ii) This blessing, land and kingdom were lost through disobedience; lost when the Israelites were swept away into exile. Many are in exile still – scattered around the

Mediterranean world. Even we who have returned to live again in this promised land have still not regained the kingdom promised to David – we are dominated by foreign powers.

- iii) These blessings, lost through disobedience, can be regained through obedience. If only we are careful to obey all of the laws God gave through Moses he will restore us.

It is important to understand that these Jewish leaders did not teach “salvation by works”: they believed themselves already to be God’s people by his unbreakable promise. What they were seeking was the recovery of God’s blessing by means of their obedience. Through their law keeping, particularly here their Sabbath keeping, they looked for the kingdom to be restored to Israel.

People define themselves by the stories they tell about themselves. It was not that these Jewish leaders had got the reading of Scripture was entirely wrong. Rather, they were partially blinded by their own views and self-understanding. The stories they told and cherished had become like distorting spectacles through which they read the Scriptures. As a result, what they read was skewed or distorted. Their story had become their interpretative framework for their reading of Scripture, seeing only what reinforced their story; blind to all the rest.

And their distorted story was:

- Self-centred – it was all about them;
- Self-justifying – they were always the good guys;
- Self-preoccupied – concerned about how *they* might obtain blessing.

And all of this made them blind to what God was really doing.

Jesus’ response to them

They have accused Jesus of being a Sabbath-breaker. Jesus responds by saying that they are blind to what God is doing. They are angry that Jesus is ‘working’ on the Sabbath, but he replies in v. 17, “My Father is always at his work to this very day, and I, too, am working.”

Jesus is saying that God did not stop working on the sixth day of creation. During those six days he created all things by the power of his word, bringing *life* into being simply at his word of command. On the seventh day God rested: He saw that everything he had made was “very good”, and he rested in the enjoyment of the world he had made, taking pleasure in a world which was precisely what he wanted it to be.

But it did not remain like that. God’s world was soon marred and broken by human rebellion. And God has been at work ever since. Not simply maintaining the world in being, though he does that. Jesus is speaking here about more than God’s providential care – that would not provide a parallel with what he is doing here. Jesus is saying that God has been at work from the time his world was spoilt, working to restore his creation – to make it again to be all that he intended it to be at the beginning.

Jesus is saying that this is the big story that runs through all the pages of Scripture – the pages of Scripture that they have been so diligently studying. God has been working to restore the creation, to redeem the world. This was what the promise to Abraham and the gift of the land were all about. This was what the kingdom given to David was all about, a kingdom which would know no end. This was the hope and vision of the prophets and the praise of the psalmists. This is what God has been up to all down the years, and every page of Scripture bears testimony to God’s mighty works.

And so, says Jesus, “I too am working... This is the very thing I am doing. Can’t you see it yet?” says Jesus. But all they can see is a Sabbath-breaker!

Here is a man who was 38 years an invalid, whom Jesus has cured with a *word*. At his command life was given to useless limbs. Jesus also is at work to restore the world, to create it again to be all that it was intended to be. But they just cannot see it. Indeed, now they have two reasons to be angry with Jesus, not only is he a Sabbath-breaker, he also makes himself out to be like God – to be equal with God!

These men are blind. For all their reading of Scripture they cannot recognise the work of God when it is right there before their eyes.

So Jesus continues: “You look for God to raise the dead on the last day? Well I am doing that right now!” (vv. 21, 24-26). And he, *Jesus*, will also be the one who raises the dead on the last day (v. 28-29).

They just cannot see what John so wonderfully describes at the beginning of his gospel. The word by which the world was made – the word which brought life into being, God’s word which has been at work through all the ages – spoken to Abraham, spoken through Moses and the prophets, accomplishing what it declared, that word has now been made flesh and is standing there in front of them. *This* is God at work to accomplish his purposes, and they just cannot see it.

No wonder Jesus says to them, “You diligently study the Scriptures because you think that by them you possess eternal life. These are the Scriptures that testify about me, yet you refuse to come to me to have life.” (vv. 39-40).

Jesus is warning of two opposite dangers

But we also need to hear the words of Jesus. Jesus is warning us of two opposing dangers.

The first is that of ignoring the Scriptures; failing to treasure and read the Bible. In this regard we need to be like these Jewish leaders. We need to study the Scriptures, to study them diligently, for they *do* hold the key to eternal life.

But secondly, Jesus is warning us that, for all our study of Scripture, we may yet fail to understand its message; we may remain blind to what it is saying.

People still define themselves by the stories they tell about themselves. It is all too easy to have a fixed set of views which we bring to Scripture – distorting lenses of our own prescribing through which we read Scripture. It is all too easy for us to reshape Scripture to fit with our own views, ensuring that it always reinforces *our* story rather than listening to the story of Scripture and letting its story shape ours.

What is the Gospel? If we were asked this question, how might we answer? Perhaps we would say that the Gospel in brief amounts to this:

- We have all sinned and deserve God’s judgment;
- Jesus died in the place of sinners, bearing the judgment which we deserved;
- All who trust in Jesus have their sins forgiven and are reconciled with God;
- Not even death can separate them from God, for Jesus has gone ahead of us to prepare a place for us.

Is this the Gospel? All of this is true and I do not deny that it forms an important part, even a central part of the Gospel. But listen again to Jesus’ words, “You diligently study the Scriptures because you think that by them you possess eternal life. These are the Scriptures that testify about me.” How does the testimony of the Old Testament reduce to this simple set of propositions?

And listen to how Jesus explains the character of his own ministry: “[Jesus] went to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, and on the Sabbath day he went into the synagogue, as was his custom. And he stood up to read. The scroll of the prophet Isaiah

was handed to him. Unrolling it, he found the place where it is written: 'The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.' Then he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant and sat down. The eyes of everyone in the synagogue were fastened on him, and he began by saying to them, 'Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing'." (Luke 4:16-21). How do Jesus' words concerning what he has come to do, reduce to this simple set of propositions?

Our gospel is too small. If God has appeared in Jesus then surely his *life*, what he said and did, and not just his atoning death must shape our understanding of the Gospel. Surely his preaching of the kingdom must also shape our understanding of the Gospel.

The Gospel is about God's purpose to redeem the world – to transform the universe; to make all things new. This is the big story that runs through every page of Scripture and this is what God was doing in Christ and has done in Christ.

This, I suggest, must shape our ministry. We need to tell the big story, to display the wonderful plan and purpose of God that runs through every page of Scripture and that centres in Christ. Jesus Christ is the heart of God revealed; he is the purpose of God accomplished. We must tell this story from every page of Scripture, from Genesis to Revelation, that people might be drawn to Jesus Christ and follow him from death to life. This demands an expository ministry rather than a thought for the day from a text for the day – a ministry which opens up the Scriptures, showing and telling what God is doing from spoilt creation to new creation and declaring that all of this has its centre in Jesus the Christ.

The burden of such a ministry may be summed up in two simple points:

- i) We need to understand this story, to understand the Mission of God that runs through all the pages of Scripture and that finds its focus and fulfilment in the Mission of Jesus. We need to understand the Scriptures by knowing Jesus – not some Jesus of our own concocting but this very Jesus who is brought to us in the gospels.
- ii) We need to be part of the story. We need to become part of the Mission of God in Jesus, part of the story. We need to become part of the Mission of God by following Jesus.

In short, we need to come to him, have life in him and to bring that life – life in all its fullness – to a dying world.