

## The Seventh Sunday of Ordinary Time (Year B)

<i>First Reading</i>	Isaiah 43:18-19,21-22,24b-25
<i>Response</i>	Lord, Heal My Soul, for I Have Sinned Against You
<i>Psalm</i>	Psalm 41:2-5,13-14
<i>Second Reading</i>	2 Corinthians 1:18-22
<i>Gospel Acclamation</i>	The Word was made flesh and lived among us; to all who did accept him he gave power to become children of God
<i>Gospel</i>	Mark 2:1-12

The 7th Sunday in Ordinary Time for Year B continues our journey through the Gospel of Mark and brings us to a very consequential miracle of Jesus, one of the first in his public ministry. That's the healing of the paralytic. This is also the first miracle where we see Jesus begin to experience serious opposition and the very important accusation of blasphemy. So let's look at what it says. Mark 2:1-12:

And when he returned to Caper'na-um after some days, it was reported that he was at home. And many were gathered together, so that there was no longer room for them, not even about the door; and he was preaching the word to them. And they came, bringing to him a paralytic carried by four men. And when they could not get near him because of the crowd, they removed the roof above him; and when they had made an opening, they let down the pallet on which the paralytic lay. And when Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, "My son, your sins are forgiven." Now some of the scribes were sitting there, questioning in their hearts, "Why does this man speak thus? It is blasphemy! Who can forgive sins but God alone?" And immediately Jesus, perceiving in his spirit that they thus questioned within themselves, said to them, "Why do you question thus in your hearts? Which is easier, to say to the paralytic, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Rise, take up your pallet and walk'? But that you may know that the Son of man has authority on earth to forgive sins"—he said to the paralytic—"I say to you, rise, take up your pallet and go home." And he rose, and immediately

took up the pallet and went out before them all; so that they were all amazed and glorified God, saying, "We never saw anything like this!"<sup>1</sup>

Okay, on the surface, what's going on here is a miracle. There's a man who's paralyzed, he's brought to Jesus, Jesus heals the man and begins to show his power, He begins to manifest his power. However, in this case, I think there's something really significant about this miracle that can easily get overlooked, and it's the question of the implicit divine claim that Jesus is making. So you can see that when he speaks to the paralytic, he says something very powerful. He says, "My son, your sins are forgiven." Now, I don't know about you, but if I was the paralytic, my response to that would have been something, shall we say, of disappointment or confusion, right? Because this man's been paralyzed, apparently for a long time. He's suffering from paralysis. His friends are bringing him here, obviously to be healed by Jesus, and when the paralytic is brought to Jesus, Jesus's first thing that he talks about is not his physical, visible ailment, but about his invisible, spiritual ailment of sin? So Jesus says, "My son, your sins are forgiven." And I can imagine the paralytic saying, well, thank you, but that's not exactly what I came for, right? I came for physical healing.

But in those words, something powerful is revealed, namely an implicit divine claim. Because the scribes, who are basically Jewish biblical scholars, these are the people who are experts in the law, when they hear Jesus declare the man's sin to be forgiven, they recognize that he's making an implicit divine claim because they say, "It is blasphemy! Who can forgive sins but God alone?" What they're reflecting here, and this is important, is the idea, based on Jewish scripture, that God alone has the authority to forgive human sins in a definitive way. So of course humans can forgive one another. If someone sins against you or you sin against someone else, you can forgive that person and you can ask for forgiveness, but that's not what they're talking about here. If you go back to the Old Testament, for example, in Leviticus 4, there are descriptions of what a person is to do. If they commit a sin, they are to bring sacrifices to the Temple. And it says that the priests will offer the sacrifice, over and over again it refrains, and the person's sins shall be forgiven.

---

<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, all Bible citations/quotations herein are from *The Holy Bible: Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*. New York: National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA, 1994.

And what that means is they shall be forgiven by God. It's God who forgives human sin. And you'll see this elsewhere in the Old Testament, Psalm 51, David says to God, "Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin!" It's something that God has the unique and exclusive power to forgive human sin.

And So what Jesus does here, He doesn't tell the man, "Go to the temple, offer a sacrifice and then your sins will be forgiven by God." He bypasses that whole process and says, "My son, your sins are forgiven", which has two important implications. Number one, that the root of this man's physical ailment is actually a spiritual ailment, sin. Number two, that Jesus is implying that he has the power, the divine power, to forgive sin, and the scribes know it, so they say in response to him, "Who can forgive sins but God alone?" And the Greek is actually stronger; the original Greek of this text...unfortunately, the RSV doesn't get it quite right here. A more literal translation is, "Who can forgive sins, but the one God." *Heis ho Theos* in Greek. Now the one God, that expression, is an allusion to Deuteronomy 6. Deuteronomy 6:4 is the famous text known as the Shema. *Shema* means hear in Hebrew. "Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God is one Lord and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might." So the confession of the one God in the Shema, which Jews would have made on a daily basis, is echoed here in the teachings and the response of the scribes when they say "Who can forgive sins but the one God?" So they recognize Jesus isn't just claiming to be, you know superhuman or to be divine, he's actually claiming, implicitly through his words, to be the one God. In other words, the God of Israel, the only one who has the power to forgive sins.

And so in response to that charge, when Jesus perceives what they're saying and what they're thinking in their hearts, He turns to them and says:

“Which is easier, to say to the paralytic, ‘Your sins are forgiven,’ or to say, ‘Rise, take up your pallet and walk’? But that you may know that the Son of man...

Which is an implicit reference to himself.

...has authority on earth to forgive sins”—he said to the paralytic— “I say to you, rise, take up your pallet and go home.”

And he does. All right, so pause there. What's the implication of this? This is a really crucial response on Jesus' part. When the scribes say, "Who can forgive sins but the one God," he is blaspheming, Jesus has every opportunity to say, "Whoa, whoa, whoa, you misunderstood me. I'm not claiming to be the one God. I'm not claiming divine authority." He could have said, "I'm the new priest, I'm a messianic priest. I have authority to offer sacrifice like the priests in the Temple," or some other explanation. In other words, he could have walked back the divine implication that the scribes pick up on, but he doesn't do that. Instead, he challenges them and he says, "OK, which is easier? To say your sins are forgiven, or to say rise, take up your palette and walk." In other words, what he's saying to them is: "I could just say his sins are forgiven and you wouldn't be able to verify whether that had taken place or not. But if I say rise, take up your palette and walk, you can see whether I have the power to do that or not because of the healing, whether it takes place or not. So what I am going to do it, in order to show you that I have the power to perform the invisible miracle of forgiving his sins, I will perform the visible miracle of healing his paralysis, so you might know that the son of man does have the authority on earth to do what seems impossible. Namely, to forgive sins." So he turns to him, he says "rise, take up your pallet and go home" and he rose.

And as Mark loves to say, "immediately". That is his favorite word. He "took up the pallet and went out before them all; so that they were all amazed and glorified God, saying, "We never saw anything like this!" There are some interpreters who will argue that Jesus isn't making a divine claim here in Mark 2. I actually cover this in more detail in my book. I have a section on this episode in my book, *The Case for Jesus: The Biblical and Historical Evidence for Christ*. So there are some skeptics who say no, no, no, Jesus isn't trying to make a divine claim, he's just making a priestly claim. He's just doing what the priests in the Temple would do. You go in and you offer a sacrifice, and then the priest acts as a kind of mediator through whom you receive the forgiveness of sins. But as I show in the book, *The Case for Jesus*, that doesn't make sense on two key counts. Number one, the scribes do not say, "Who can forgive sin, but priests alone." If they had said that,

then that would be a reasonable interpretation of the text. But they don't say that. They say he's blaspheming, "Who can forgive sins but the one God?" Secondly, and this is equally important, how do the people react? The people have been to the Temple before. The people have seen priests offer sacrifices of atonement in the Temple and had their sins forgiven. If they've ever been to the Temple, they've witnessed it. But what they've never seen is a man tell another man, "Your sins are forgiven," and then heal him in order to prove that he has the power to do it.

So this episode at the beginning of Mark's Gospel is absolutely crucial because in it, Jesus isn't just beginning to reveal his messianic identity or his identity as a savior, He's beginning to reveal his divine identity by doing something that only the one God of Israel has the authority to do, namely, to forgive human sin, and by performing a miracle that no mere mortal has the power to do, namely, to give a paralyzed man the ability to take up his palette, walk, and go home. And that's the Gospel for today.

The Old Testament reading kind of points up this divine self-claim. If you go back to the Old Testament for today, the first reading is from Isaiah 43:18-19, 21-22, 24b-25. Isaiah 43 is one of the most explicitly monotheistic oracles anywhere in the Old Testament. So if you look at the passage for today, it says this:

“Remember not the former things, nor consider the things of old. Behold, I am doing a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert...the people whom I formed for myself that they might declare my praise.

And then if you skip down, it says in verse 24:

You have not bought me sweet cane with money, or satisfied me with the fat of your sacrifices. But you have burdened me with your sins, you have wearied me with your iniquities. “I, I am He who blots out your transgressions for my own sake, and I will not remember your sins.

Very important passage here because of two things. First, God's saying he's going to do something new in salvation history. As scholars have pointed out, this is the promise of a new exodus. He's going to make a new way in the wilderness to lead home to a new promised land. And in order for that to take place, second thing he says is, I'm going to blot out your transgressions. I'm going to forgive your sins. And he does that in the context of saying "I, I am He." This is an allusion to the famous "I am" passage in the book of Exodus 3:14-16, where Moses asked God, well, if I go to the people of Israel, what would I tell them your name is. And God says "I AM WHO I AM." Tell them "I AM" has sent you to them. So here Isaiah is using similar language to describe the divine name, the name of the one God of Israel. The God who is able to forgive sins. The God who appeared to Moses on Mount Sinai. So when you take that Old Testament reading and you fast forward to the New Testament, it makes sense. There's a correlation here. The one God is promising to do something new in the Old Testament and in the New Testament, when Jesus heals this paralyzed man, something no one's ever seen before, and says your sins are forgiven. How do the scribes react? This man's blaspheming "Who can forgive sins but the one God", meaning the one God of Israel? So it's a parallel connection, a striking parallel between the old and the new in the readings for today.

And as always, the Psalm for today, Psalm 41, is a bridge between the Old Testament and the New Testament reading in Ordinary Time, by describing God in Psalm 41, especially in verses 2, 5, 13 and 14, as the God who heals those who are ill. So God's not just the Lord of creation. He's not just the Creator. He's not just the Savior. He's not just the ruler. He's also the healer. And just as God in the Old Testament in the Psalms is described as the one who heals those who are sick, heals those who are ill, so too in the Gospel for today, Jesus comes on to the scene in the Gospel of Mark and reveals himself as a healer, as the one who has the power to give a paralyzed man the ability to walk, so that the people say, effectively, God's doing a new thing. "We've never saw anything like this."

So I'll close here with two quotes, one from a contemporary scholar and one from the living tradition. In her commentary on the Gospel of Mark, Adela Yarbro Collins, a Catholic scholar who teaches at Yale, draws out the divine implications

of this passage. Again, I quote from this in my book *The Case for Jesus* if you want to look at it. It is a very important text. She says this:

[T]here is no precedent for a human being making a simple declaration that God is at this moment forgiving another human being's sin... What Jesus has said calls the unity of God into question.<sup>2</sup>

In other words, from the perspective of the scribes, Jesus is threatening the unity of the one God, by saying something and acting as if he can do something only the one God can do. So in other words, contemporary scholars recognize the implicitly divine claim of Jesus' action. Does Jesus say, hey, everybody, I'm God? No, no, he doesn't say that explicitly. But he implicitly reveals his divinity by doing something that, in a Jewish context, everyone would recognize as something only the one God can do, namely forgive the transgressions of a human being. And it doesn't take contemporary scholarship to note that. If you go back to the living tradition, St. John Chrysostom in his homily on this gospel from the 4th century, a homily on the paralytic being let down to the roof. Chrysostom writes:

He confirmed this [his divinity] through his own actions.. The scribes themselves had devised this definition. They themselves had introduced the precept. But he proceeded to entangle them in their own words. In effect he said: it is you yourselves who have confessed that forgiveness of sin is given to God alone.<sup>3</sup>

In other words, He doesn't have to say he's divine or that he's doing something the one God alone can do because the scribes have said it for him. And we'll see this over and over in the Gospels. Jesus reveals his divinity, but he does it in a Jewish way, through through allusions to Jewish scripture, through riddles and through questions, and in this case, through letting his opponents reveal his divinity for him.

---

<sup>2</sup> Adela Yarbro Collins, *Mark*. Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007.

<sup>3</sup> Thomas C. Oden and Christopher A. Hall, *Mark* (Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture, New Testament 2; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1998), 28.