

Paralysis, Stem Cells and the Human Condition

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Preacher: Dave Fuller

[0 : 00] This is the evening service at Holy Trinity on the 23rd of June 2002. The preacher is Dave Fuller.

His sermon is entitled Paralysis, Stem Cells and the Human Condition. It is based on Mark 2, verses 1-13.

Just before I begin, I want to say what I'm trying to do tonight. And that my perspective tonight is not so much ethical, but evangelistic and gospel.

That part of what I'm doing tonight has been my genuine struggle with the ethical dilemma that's currently going on with respect to stem cells research.

But that I am not an ethicist. And even though I did ethics at college and majored in ethics during my Bachelor of Theology, and that ethics is a passion and an area of interest.

[1 : 08] It is not my primary ability or gift. And it's not my intention tonight. And what I do want to do tonight, after I've examined this particular theme and examined this gospel text that has been read to us, I do want to give people an opportunity to make a response to the good news of Jesus.

The way I will do that is that when I do finish, I will lead simply two prayers. And the first prayer will be a prayer that many people pray as they enter into new life in Christ.

And you may wish to pray that prayer as I lead you. And if you do respond and pray that prayer, then my advice is that you tap a friend on the shoulder who's a keen Christian friend and say, I prayed that prayer and I want to know what the next step is.

And the second prayer will be that perhaps tonight might be an opportunity for you to recommit yourself to Christ. And it's not easy. It's not that easy to be a Christian.

It's not that hard for our passions toward Christ to get seduced and start running after other things. And we live in a seductive culture. And so our passion for the gospel can sometimes grow cold and dim over time.

[2 : 27] And tonight might be an opportunity to renew that commitment. Let me begin with a story, though, that I want to share and then leave it to the side for a minute and then I'll sort of come back to it.

In the movie The Crying Game, some IRA terrorists have taken captive a British soldier and hidden him out in the back blocks of Ireland on a farm.

Now, during the period of captivity, the soldier and the terrorist begin a bit of a dialogue and get to know each other and a relationship of almost sort of mutual affection begins to form.

But during the conversation at one stage, the soldier says to the terrorist, you're going to kill me. That's what you do. And the terrorist said, no, we're not. As soon as our hostage demands are met, we will set you free.

And then the soldier says, no, you won't. And then he tells him the story of the scorpion and the frog. You see, in the story of the scorpion and the frog, there's this swollen river and the scorpion wants to get to the other side.

[3 : 41] And so he sees his mate, the frog, a little bit further up and sort of trots up to the frog and says, can you take me across the river? And the frog says, nah, I'll take you across the river.

You'll sting me and then we'll both drown. The scorpion says to the frog, that would be silly, wouldn't it? I want to get across to the other side. The frog thinks that's pretty good logic and accepts the invitation.

Scorpion jumps onto the back of the frog and off across the river they go. Halfway across the river, the frog feels this intense sting and pain in its back.

And just as the poison begins to paralyze the system of the frog, he says to the scorpion, why did you do that? And the scorpion says, I'm a scorpion and I sting.

That's what I do. You see, just as it is in the nature of the scorpion to sting, it was in the nature of the terrorist to kill.

[4 : 51] And that is why the British soldier uses that story in his conversation with the terrorist. Let me leave that story to the side for a minute.

I'm going to come back to it periodically as we go through the message. When I was a child, I loved comics. Batman and Robin, Spider-Man, Superman, Dick Tracy, The Phantom.

And in my early teenage years, these comic strip characters became the half-hour show you would watch when you got home from school and had your milk and arrowroot biscuit and, you know, sort of watch the TV show.

Again, Batman and Robin, Spider-Man, Superman, Dick Tracy, The Phantom. And in my adult years, these TV action heroes have become Hollywood blockbusters.

Again, Spider-Man at the moment. Batman, Robin, Superman, Dick Tracy, The Phantom. If you watch these movies carefully, there's a fairly normal scripted line.

[6 : 02] And this is the way it goes. Number one, evil is winning the day and the people cry out. Number two, our action hero arrives on the scene. Number three, evil characters become aware of the chink in the armour of our action hero.

For instance, Kryptonite when it comes to Superman. And it seems that if evil is going to win the day. And just as our anxiety levels are going through the roof, the super action hero overcomes evil, saves the day, and we all leave the cinema feeling great.

Right has overcome wrong. Good has overcome evil. And our action hero has saved the day. But many years ago, super action fantasy hero Superman, played by the actor Christopher Reeves, had a horse riding accident.

And as a result, he broke his neck, snapped his spinal cord, and became a quadriplegic. He is a heartbreaking sight.

Very, very passionate about this current issue, as you would understand. And in the recent public debate, when it came to the pros and cons of stem cell research, Reeves made an impassioned and emotional cry that governments lift their ban that prevents the harvesting of embryonic stem cells.

[7 : 31] Reeves claimed that scientists should be free to do research with such human embryos in the hope that new tissue can grow, perhaps healing broken spinal cords and creating the conditions for the spinal cord to regrow, because most of us know that when it's broken, it cannot heal itself or repair itself.

Perhaps even the answer to dementia and other crippling disorders. His argument is potent. When he gets up there in that wheelchair and says what he says, his argument is passionate, persuasive and dynamic.

Ultimately, though, the Christian Church came out in response, whether it was Dennis Hart, the Catholic Archbishop of Melbourne, the Reverend Tim Costello, our own Archbishop, arguing that the fundamental principle held by all people, whether religious, agnostic or atheist, is that human life is sacred and is not to be experimented upon except voluntarily.

But as I began to grapple with this issue, I asked the classic question, what would Jesus do? WWJD, you know, that little bracelet you see sometimes around the place.

What would Jesus do? And I know it's a difficult question because it's very, very hard to see what would Jesus do when it comes to some of the ethical dilemmas we face. But I was reminded of Jesus as dealing with the paralysed man.

[9 : 01] And so I turned to that story as I grappled with the issue and asked myself, what did Jesus do when it came to the issue of a paralysed man?

A few days later, when Jesus entered Capernaum, the people heard that he had come home. The hometown hero returns.

Jesus is back at his base in Capernaum there, just to the north, the Sea of Galilee. He's been out and about preaching. He's been healing people. A demonised man is healed in the synagogue there in Capernaum, a place I visited in 1999 on the Ridley College study tour.

I've been in that very synagogue where that event happened. And I remember standing there trying to wonder what that scene was like. The hometown hero has returned. He's been healing.

He's been preaching. He's been teaching. And the word has got about and people are fascinated and attracted. So many were gathered there that no room was left, not even outside the door.

[10 : 07] And Jesus preached the word to them. Now, while this is going on, a bunch of friends have obviously got together and they've heard the news that Jesus has been healing people.

And they get their mate who's been paralysed for we don't know how long. And they take him to Jesus in the hope that Jesus would make him well. Well, the determination of the friends is admirable and they bring him right up to the door, but they can't get in.

The place is chock-a-block full and they are left with a dilemma. What shall we do? Well, these people are resourceful. These friends are passionate and they ask themselves, what are we going to do?

They've obviously had a little bit of a conversation on the side. They think, well, let's go up to the top of this classic Middle Eastern home. Let's pull a hole in the roof and we'll drop our mate in. That's how we're going to get him in. And that's exactly what they do.

I wish I had been there that day. Do you imagine being in the gospel stories? Or do we just read them sort of out there? Do we really engage them?

[11 : 20] Do we really enter into them and start to let our imagination go as to what it would have been like to be in that room? Here we are in this sort of classic lounge room area, sitting there in the Middle Eastern dust as Jesus.

People gathered around preaching the word. I suggest in my imagination, the atmosphere would have been electric. You could have heard a pin drop, to use an analogy from our context, people riveted to the word of Jesus.

And then suddenly you can hear this sort of scratching around the roof, looking up and suddenly bits of straw are dropping in and suddenly more falls down and there's a bunch of people up there peeking down through the light.

Do you think it would have got their attention? I think it would have. And so these friends of faith and passion lower their paralysed friend down to the floor, right in front of Jesus.

When Jesus saw their faith, interesting line, we don't know if the paralysed man has faith at all. We can assume he does, but we don't know.

[12 : 37] There is silence on the question. But Jesus sees the faith of the friends. Without faith, it's impossible to please God. And it's this faith that Jesus responds to.

He says to the paralysed man, Son, your sins are forgiven. Fascinating.

Jesus knows that they've brought him here to get him healed. That's why they've gone to the trouble. They believe that Jesus can heal this man and that's why they've brought him along.

But Jesus doesn't respond to that straight away. Jesus goes to the heart of a different matter. Not so much his physical paralysis, but what I think is a deeper and more fundamental issue within his own condition.

His sinfulness. His fallenness. His separation from the grace of God. His human condition. Paralysed.

[13 : 49] You know, I believe we are paralysed, sisters and brothers, in a different way. Even though most of us have been able to walk in here tonight and we say to our hand, move and it moves.

Because there is no damage in the nervous system of our bodies. But I want to suggest to you tonight that we are victims of another form of paralysis.

And I'll get to that shortly. Now some of the teachers of the law were sitting there thinking to themselves, why does this fellow talk like that? He's blaspheming.

Only God can forgive sins. Well their theology is pretty good. Only God can forgive sins. But they didn't recognise who was sitting there in their midst.

This is the one who co-created the universe with his father. This is the second person of the Trinity. This is God in human form sitting in their midst.

[14 : 58] Jesus understands their cynicism and lays out this rhetorical challenge. He knows what they're thinking. And then he says these words and asks this rhetorical question, which is easier to say?

Son, your sins are forgiven or get up and walk? I know what the easy answer is.

Clearly it's to say, son, your sins are forgiven. That doesn't require a miraculous sign. Which is easier?

He lays out the challenge to the sceptics and to those who misunderstand. Which is easier? To say to the paralysed man, son, your sins are forgiven or to say, get up and walk?

And then he says to those who are gripped by his presence and to the sceptics, but that you might know that the son of man has authority on earth to forgive sin.

[16 : 12] I say to you, get up, take up your mat and go home. I believe that is exactly what happened.

The miraculous activity that is around the word and work of Jesus is to authenticate who he is. The son of man, the son of God, the one who has authority on earth to forgive sins, the one who would die on the cross some years later to take upon himself the sin of the world.

Which is easier? To say to the paralysed man, son, your sins are forgiven or to say, get up, take up your mat and walk?

He got up, took up his mat and walked out in full view of them all. This amazed everyone and they praised God saying, we have never seen anything like this.

But that you might know that the son of man has authority on earth to forgive sin, I say to you, get up and walk.

[17 : 42] I believe that in this story we see one way of how Jesus deals with the issue of what we're grappling with in our own culture.

Jesus knows that this man has been brought to him for healing and he does it. But he first attends to the deeper healing and the deeper issue and that is the paralysis within the human condition.

The Apostle Paul puts it like this in Romans 7, even though the good I want to do I can't and the things I don't want to do I end up doing. Oh wretched man that I am.

The good that we want to do we don't seem to do. The things we don't want to do we seem to do. The great dilemma of the human condition and just it is in the nature of the scorpion to sting.

It's in our nature to sin. We sin because that's in our nature and as the song came out many many years ago we're just doing what comes naturally.

[18 : 57] How do we deal with the paralysis? How do we deal with that dilemma? Well that's why Jesus was sent into the world to save sinners.

In the end Jesus Christ comes into the world to deal with the paralysis of human sinfulness the bondage the dilemma that all of us are caught up in and Jesus comes into the world to save us to set us free and to forgive us by virtue of his work on the cross his mighty resurrection from the dead.

The gospel sisters and brothers calls all men and women to repentance calls us to turn from our self-centered orientation and our paralysis and to turn to Christ and to say forgive me set me free cast my sins as far as the east is from the west and give me the power and the strength to break the stranglehold that sin has on me and to be free to serve the living God in the way that he calls us to live.

You see the gospel promises three things to those who repent of their sin and place their faith and trust in Jesus Christ.

and what he has done on our behalf on the cross. The first promise deals with the past. The second promise deals with the current and the ongoing and the final promise deals with the future.

[20 : 46] The first promise to those who repent is this the promise is your sins will be forgiven. The slate wiped clean the page turned over a fresh beginning as far as the east is from the west are your sins cast away from you the old is gone the new has come.

oh I still remember every time I go to get the bread and the wine at my local Anglican church in Brunswick where we live I was there again this morning just kneeling down to get the bread and the wine off the priest and those same feelings of what it was to be forgiven keep flooding back almost 20 years now 22 years or whatever when I first asked Christ to forgive me I feel those emotions again gratitude that the old is gone and the new has come set free to love God with my whole being set free to love my neighbour as myself to love my wife my children my mother-in-law who lives with us the neighbours around me wherever I operate in the world free to love liberated from my self-centred orientation liberated from the bondage and paralysis of my own sinfulness the old is gone the new has come forgiven the second promise that the apostles preached for those who repent and for those who put their faith and trust in Jesus Christ as Saviour and Lord is this the gift of the Holy

Spirit you cannot live this new life without the power of his Spirit you cannot overcome the bondage and darkness of our own nature and the paralysis without the work of Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit the waste and gravity of our own condition just keeps pulling us down and without the power of the Spirit we are unable to live out the ethical demands of the gospel to turn from our self-centred orientation and to give ourselves with great passion and everything we have to the purposes of God in the world the second promise is the promise of the gift of the Holy Spirit and the final promise the apostles spoke about a very comforting one as I got very bad news today of a friend that I used to work with on the road traveling all over the country who died very prematurely and very very suddenly and I got that news very very late last night and had a very troubled night just profoundly depressed by it and profoundly depressed today as I had to ring all my friends and tell them and then wondering how

I'm going to get over there for the funeral later this week but what comforts me is the final promise the gift of eternal life is promise to those who repent of their sins and put their faith and their trust in Jesus Christ I've said this in many places and many places over the years but I'll say it again one of the reasons in our culture we are obsessed with the here and now we are obsessed with our bodies so obsessed with the shape so obsessed with personal pleasure is that as a culture we have lost any sense that there's something beyond this life I'm not saying we just give up shop and wait till God takes us away you get saved for a reason so you get to work in the vineyard so to speak and you work your tail off in God's kingdom until you do get taken away I'm not saying just relax and don't do nothing until he takes you away and you get the gift of eternal life but I would say this that part of our obsession within here and now is that loss of a perspective that tells us that this life is short this life is over in an instant you talk with an older person people in their 70s and 80s and they say it to me where did it go where did it go you know what

I want to say to Christopher Reeves I hope we do find a solution to your pain because every time I see him I feel the pain and I feel the pain of anybody dealing with chronic illness and anybody struggling with the difficulty that that is and we've had 13 or 14 years of it in my own family with my brother-in-law so sick with this chronic fatigue I'd love to be able to wave a magic wand over the pain it causes him and the stress it's put into our family but I would say this to Christopher Reeves and I would say this to my brother-in-law I know he holds it as a truth everybody who Jesus healed died and in the end something greater is beyond this life of pain and suffering and when I read the book of Revelation and the promise of what it's going to be like when God restores all things no more pain no more tears no more suffering oh I long for that it keeps me going in the midst of what I've got to deal with later in the week and what I have to deal with week in week out in the context of our own family yeah sure

[26 : 21] Jesus healed the paralyzed man and it was a wonderful healing but he dealt with what I believe is the more central healing need in our culture the healing of the human condition the paralysis of our sin that is what is required that is the healing we need for just as the scorpion stings because it's in the nature of the scorpion to sting it's in our nature to sin and unless we are transformed by the power of God by virtue of his death on the cross and mighty resurrection and the power of his spirit at work in the world we are paralyzed and we are trapped and we are in bondage and the place to begin is to cry out to God and say please forgive me set me free grant me the gift of your spirit and grant me the grace and power to live this new life in Christ set free from my obsession with myself set free to love

God with my whole being set free to love my neighbor as myself I want to call for a moment of quiet reflection as we reflect on God's word and what God may have spoken to us tonight from it whether you close your eyes and find that helpful that's fine or whether you don't let's just have a quiet moment of reflection and then I'll lead these two prayers I suggested that I would do at the commencement of the message friends there may be people tonight who have never responded in faith to Christ never formally said yes to him and no to the paralysis of their own condition if you want to respond to faith by faith to Jesus tonight and I'm going to pray a short prayer that you might wish to pray quietly under your breath and if you pray this prayer I invite you to indicate that to a trusted

Christian friend here or to those who are involved in leadership with the youth group here with Danny and others and tap on their shoulder and say perhaps later I prayed that prayer and I need to know what the next step is loving God I thank you that you sent Jesus into the world to save sinners I'm one of them please forgive me by virtue of your work on the cross and your mighty resurrection please grant me the gift of forgiveness of sins please grant me the gift of your Holy Spirit that I might be empowered to turn from my self-centered orientation to a Christ centered orientation to turn from a selfish orientation to an outward loving and serving orientation toward others to turn from a smugness and an arrogance to a humility and a gentleness please grant me the gift of eternal life thank you for your death on the cross thank you that you love me thank you that you have brought me into your family help me to find people who can help me grow in my new life in

Jesus to help me mature to help me find my place in the church to help me find my role in the world to help me identify my gifts and my contribution and my place to your work in the world I pray these things in Jesus name amen and a second prayer perhaps for those who have made a step to place their faith and trust in Jesus Christ but other loves other passions other interests have begun to have a seductive and wearing effect and you know in your heart are hearts that you do not love God with your whole heart or your neighbor as yourself and other gods have taken preeminence in your life well hear the good news from the gospel when Jesus said those who turn to me

I will not reject so you may wish to pray this prayer if that is where you're at quietly under your breath loving God I thank you for the promise of the gospel that those who turn to you shall not be rejected I thank you for your love to me that despite my sin and love of other gods you call me back because you are gracious and because you are kind please forgive me for the other gods of the age have seduced me and taken me away from my love of you and I turn back to you and say sorry but also say give me the grace and the power to respond to Jesus as Lord to love

[32 : 48] God with my whole heart soul mind and strength and to love my neighbour as myself thank you for the gifts and the abilities that you have given me by virtue of inheritance from my parents and the family line and by virtue of training and study and hard work help me to give of those gifts and passions whether they're expressed in the midst of the church here or in the world that I might be a light and I might be salt in the darkness of this world and stand for something that in the end is eternal that is not fictitious and it is not as fickle as our culture and its obsessions thank you that you receive me back fill me with renewed passion for you

I pray these things in Jesus name Amen joy you you you you you you