

A Man Called Basil

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[0 : 01] This is the evening service at Holy Trinity on the 18th of June 2000. The preacher is Paul Barker. His sermon is entitled A Man Called Basil and is from John chapter 4 verses 46 to 54.

I want you to meet Basil. Basil is desperate. Basil is urgent. Basil's son is sick. Basil's son is actually more than sick. Basil's son is at the point of death.

It seems that the doctors have failed and there doesn't seem to be much hope left for Basil's little boy. So what does he do? He's heard about Jesus. Jesus' reputation has already gained some prominence in Galilee in the north of Israel.

This Jesus who seems to have just suddenly appeared on the scene who is at least a miracle worker. People up the road in Cana have told Basil and people down the road at Capernaum probably about the water that had become wine at a wedding feast not that long ago.

Or maybe we can imagine that it's not Basil who's heard about Jesus but his wife. I mean after all they would be on the phone. She'd be on the phone with probably the women who'd been at the wedding feast up at Cana and talking half the day on the phone no doubt.

[1 : 34] And maybe you can imagine her telling her husband to go and find Jesus. Basil! Off you go! To Jesus! Basil! I've told you once Basil! So he goes. Who wouldn't? If you had a wife like Sybil.

Jesus is the last hope it seems. And off he goes. Up the hill. Up the hills. From Capernaum down on the Sea of Galilee up to Cana in the hills.

Quite a steep climb really. 20 miles. But basically it's uphill. From well below sea level to well above sea level. It's probably an overnight journey.

And that's what we read in the reading that was for us tonight. Jesus had come to Cana in Galilee again. He'd been there earlier on in John's Gospel chapter 2.

It was the wedding feast. He turned the water into wine. And there was a royal official whose son lay ill in Capernaum down the hill. And when he heard that Jesus had come from Judea down south back to Galilee in the north.

[2 : 43] He went and begged him to come down and heal his son for he was at the point of death. Now I guess his name was Basil. And the reason I guess his name was Basil is because the word for royal official is Basilikos.

Basil with an I-K-O-S on the end. So my guess is that his name must have been Basil. And that's why I call him Basil. And it seems as good a name as any. So we might as well use it. Jesus' response to Basil is not all that encouraging at first.

In fact I think Basil would be rather sort of put out. That he's walked 20 miles uphill. Basil, desperate, urgent to find Jesus just say to him.

Unless you see signs and wonders you will not believe. Now that's a bit of a rebuff isn't it? For a man whose little boy is close to death. It's not very pastoral to do that.

We weren't taught in theological college to be pastorally sensitive by saying to somebody who comes to us in a pastoral need. You guys just want signs and wonders. Full stop. I don't think Basil would be very impressed by his first sort of encounter with Jesus at this point.

[3 : 58] But Jesus is not just talking about Basil when he says you unless you see signs and wonders. The word you is plural. One of the troubles with English language and one of the reasons why Hebrew will be the language of heaven.

So you might as well Peter start learning it now. Is that we can determine whether it's a singular or a plural. If I say you're late. Do I mean you singular one of you or do I mean all of you.

Well Jesus is talking not to Basil or about Basil. But about you Jews generally. Unless you Jews see signs and wonders. You will not believe.

That is that's the way that Jews were characterized. They're all about signs and wonders. They're wanting to see miracles. And if you read the gospels you see that it's true. Is Basil any different from that?

That's in effect what Jesus is saying to him. Unless you Jews see signs and wonders you're not going to believe. It's a challenge to Basil. Are you like that? Or are you perhaps a little bit different?

[5 : 01] You see for the Jews seeing is believing. They need to see a sign, a miracle, a great wonder like the water into wine at Cana. Before they'll believe. Andrew Lloyd Webber captured that in a Herod song in Jesus Christ Superstar.

Do you remember Herod's rather mocking, taunting words? Prove to me that you're divine. Turn my water into wine. Prove to me that you're no fool. Walk across my swimming pool.

Well Jesus is saying that the Jews are just like that. Basil are you like that? Are you like everyone else? Are you just seeking a sign or a wonder? Well poor old Basil's not really in the mood for and has the time for a philosophical discussion about the nature of signs and wonders and whether they stimulate or create faith or not.

He just wants his boys healed. He doesn't want to stand around sort of talking like the Greeks in flowing robes back in Athens. He's in a hurry. Quick, quick. Come on Jesus. Haven't got time to be talking.

Come down to Capernaum and heal my boy. There's an urgency in the voice where he says to him, Sir, come down before my little boy dies. In effect he ignores Jesus' challenge of verse 48.

[6 : 15] He just says, come down and heal him before he dies. He's desperate. But Jesus refuses to go. Again, he doesn't obviously show a lot of pastoral concern here.

He doesn't say to him, look, there, there. I'll come down. Or, yeah, hang on a minute. I've got a few things to do up here. He just sends Basil back home.

Go, Jesus says to him. Your son will live. Jesus is not acting as a prophet there. He's not predicting that, look, it's okay, Basil.

The symptoms that you've described, he'll get better. They're not going to cause death. He's not acting as a sort of medical expert or a diagnostician or a prophet or a predictor of what's going to happen.

When Jesus says, go, your son will live, he's actually healing him in those very words. They are words of power, not words of prediction.

[7 : 18] But we don't actually see that until we get towards the end of this account. Basil, of course, sees nothing. Basil doesn't see a miracle or a sign.

All he hears are Jesus' words, go, your son will live. And the astonishing thing is that Basil goes.

He goes because he believes. The man believed the word that Jesus spoke to him and started on his way.

The first thing to note about this is that faith is seen in obedience. The man does what Jesus tells him to.

That's how we know he's got faith. It isn't that Basil believed Jesus' word that his son was miraculously healed, but he stayed put in disobedience to Jesus' command to go. Basil believed, therefore he obeyed.

[8 : 26] Many people claim to have Christian faith. Most of us included. Sean has just professed his Christian faith along with us.

But faith is not an intellectual assent only about the facts of Jesus, his life, his death, his resurrection, or anything like that. Faith is much more than that.

Christian faith is not an intellectual assent to some truths of Christian dogma, though it's part of that. But faith is evident in action. It is trust.

It is trusting Jesus' words, in this case, that the boy will live. And so he goes. Faith is expressed in obedience. Faith is evidenced in obedience.

So if you claim to have Christian faith, where is the evidence of obedience in your life? If it's not there, if it's hard to find, then we'd have to question whether there is actually faith there.

[9 : 33] Faith produces obedience. Basil is an illustration of that. There are dozens more in the Bible of that. If you're a person who claims Christian faith, it will be evident in the obedience of your life to the commands of Jesus Christ.

The second thing to note about this faith is that it trusts Jesus' promise that the boy will live. It's not just obedience to a command, go, but it trusts what Jesus promises.

It responds to a promise. So again, the challenge for us is, and John has written this example, I'm sure, as a paradigm or model for what faith is meant to be like.

The question is, what promises of Jesus do you trust in your life? Jesus promises that heaven is entered by grace. Do you trust that?

Or do you struggle to somehow buy or earn your own way into heaven? Jesus promises that God will never forsake us. Do you trust that promise?

[10 : 43] Or do you cry out, where are you God, you've abandoned me, when you feel low or depressed? God promises that he will supply every daily need you have.

Do you trust that promise? Or do you worry about what's going to happen tomorrow? Do you worry about your exam results? Do you worry about your health? Do you worry about your lack of employment and so on?

Or do you trust the promise? The third thing about faith illustrated here is not that seeing is believing, but that believing is seeing.

People often say, people who aren't Christians, that they will believe if Jesus could do some miracle or sign. They say, look, if Jesus came back now and did something, then I'd believe in him.

But he's not here, so I don't. The point is, I doubt that they would even if he did. You see, we don't need to see in order to believe.

[11 : 45] We don't need to pick up a glass of wine that was suddenly miraculously turned from water in order to believe in Jesus. We don't need to have a sick son or sick relative that is miraculously healed in order to believe in Jesus.

We don't need to be part of a crowd of 5,000 people who are suddenly miraculously fed loaves and fishes in order to believe in Jesus. John's gospel is written so that we who don't see still believe.

Jesus' words, as recorded in, say, John's gospel that we're looking at here, but Matthew, Mark and Luke as well, as well as the rest of the New Testament, is sufficient for us to have faith and trust in Jesus Christ.

He's not here physically like he was then and even if he were, many people wouldn't believe in him. They didn't then. They wouldn't now. But what is sufficient are the words that are recorded for us to stimulate us to have faith and trust in Jesus Christ now.

That's the reason John wrote this gospel. We can't be around and see the various things that Jesus did. But John wrote his gospel, he tells us at the end of chapter 20, so that you, the reader, may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.

[13 : 03] Now those words are just after John has recounted what happened to Thomas. Thomas doubted that Jesus was risen from the dead. He said, unless I see the hands and scars, I will not believe.

Jesus acceded to that request, unusually, and Thomas believed. And Jesus' words to Thomas after that, have you believed because you have seen me?

Yes, is the implied answer. Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe. And that, my friends, is you and me, who are Christian people.

People who aren't alive when Jesus was physically alive on earth. Who haven't seen his miracles and his scars in his side. And yet read and heed these words and without seeing, still believe.

Basil was an example, for us, of somebody who didn't see, but heard the words and yet still believed. So Basil heads off, trusting Jesus' word, obeying his command to go.

[14 : 18] And on the way home, remember it's probably an overnight journey, though I guess it would be quicker going home than coming up the hill, his slaves met him. And they told him that his child was alive.

So Basil asked them, the hour when he began to recover and they said to him, yesterday at one in the afternoon, the fever left him. And Basil realized that this was the exact hour when Jesus had said to him, your son will live.

So he himself believed, along with his whole household. His faith is actually confirmed and strengthened by the slaves' announcement that at the exact time that Jesus said, your son will live, the son lived.

and was healed. It wasn't a gradual recovery, but Jesus' words healed the boy. The same powerful word that created the world in an instant is at work in healing this boy in an instant.

The same powerful word that calmed the storm in an instant has healed this boy in an instant. The same powerful word that called forth Lazarus dead from a tomb but alive is the same powerful word that has healed this boy suddenly, instantaneously.

[15 : 41] You see, God speaks and it happens. Jesus speaks and it happens. This is the power of God's word at work. A powerful word indeed. A word that can create the world.

A word that can bring forth the dead from the grave. A word that can control nature and calm a storm instantaneously. A word that can heal a sick boy instantly and from a distance.

It's a powerful, life-giving word. And you see, that's what we need. Not to be there to see the healing, but to be the recipients of the same word.

And we don't need to hear it audibly from Jesus' lips. We have it here written. The same powerful word to bring life even in situations of death.

The episode finishes with John telling us that this was the second sign that Jesus did after coming from Judea to Galilee. That is, it's not an end in itself.

[16 : 46] It's a sign. And a sign points to something else. A sign points to the goal. To something bigger. If you want to go to some sort of special place, you don't rejoice when you stand at the sign and think, well, I'm here.

But you actually got to go where the sign points you to the special place to which it points you. That's the goal. This is a sign. It's pointing to something bigger. The issue here, you see, is not just healing.

It is about giving life. The point is that the boy's not just sick, that he's on the point of death. In effect, life has been brought to him out of the claws of death itself. So the miracle is a sign pointing to the fact that Jesus is the life giver, not just a healer of the sick.

He is the life giver at the point of death. And they are what the signs throughout the gospel of John are all about. The water into wine at the same place in Cana of Galilee was about the same sort of thing.

It's about the nature of God's abundant life. So is this miracle. So in the earlier part of the same chapter, the words that Jesus spoke to the woman at the well point to the fact that Jesus is a life giver.

[18 : 05] Not just physical water, but the water, the spiritual water, that will lead to somebody never thirsting. The same with the words of Jesus after feeding the 5,000. He's not just the one who gives bread because they're hungry.

He's the one who's the bread of life. And when he called Lazarus out of the tomb, we see again and even more starkly that he is indeed the life giver, the resurrection and the life.

But of course, all those miracles put together are all signs pointing to the same place, to an empty tomb on the first Easter day. For Jesus, the life giver, is the one who himself conquered death and rose and the grave was empty.

That's the main event. That's where the sign is pointing. That's where Basil's son getting better is heading towards. Jesus risen from the tomb, alive forevermore.

The life giver indeed, the source of life itself. John's gospel began by heralding that very theme. In him, in the word, was life.

[19 : 10] And here it is for Basil and his boy. Only Jesus is the true giver of life. Let's pray.

O God, we thank you indeed for this life, but in particular that this life that Jesus gives us through his death and resurrection.

Thank you that he's conquered death, that he not only rose from the dead, but he lives forevermore. Thank you for the invitation to share in that eternal life with him and you in heaven forever.

Help us to have the right faith, to trust Jesus' promises, to obey his words, to trust that his death and resurrection has brought us to you, to life forever.

Amen.