

Northolt Park Baptist Church

Seeing Jesus – John 4:46-54 – New Power

I'll believe it when I see it! A child has just promised to tidy their bedroom, and the parent says 'I'll believe it when I see it!' The party political broadcast declares that 'voting for us' will mean economic recovery, better education, and shorter hospital waiting lists. And you say, 'I'll believe it when I see it!' The husband says 'I'm going to lose a bit of weight this year', and the wife says, 'I'll believe it when I see it!' In many aspects of life, we *do* need to see to believe. A little bit of scepticism is healthy; it stops us being disappointed.

And even John the gospel writer recognises this to some extent. In chapter 20, he relates the story of Thomas who says, effectively, 'I'll believe it when I see it!' He reminds us that even Jesus' disciples struggled with this issue of seeing and believing. And yet, he tells us, he has written his gospel because he wants to lead people to faith who have not seen, to tell the story of Jesus in such a way that men and women will believe in Jesus as Messiah and Son of God, and by believing have life in his name (20:30-31).

We pick up the story of Jesus where we left off last time, with Jesus at a wedding in Cana in Galilee (2:1-11). Since then, he has travelled to Jerusalem for the passover; he has had a conversation in the evening with a respected, male, Jewish teacher; on the way back, he has had a conversation in the middle of the day with a dodgy, female, Samaritan of dubious morals! John then tells us that Jesus comes back to Cana (4:46a). He reminds us what happened there (where the water had been turned into wine), which might prompt thoughts as to whether we should look for another sign; and by the time we get to the end of the story, we discover our hunch is right (4:54)!

Interestingly, here – as in the water-into-wine episode – a need is expressed, which Jesus initially rebuffs; however, he still helps, but does so in an unexpected way; and servants

are involved; and faith comes about: people *believe*. The account is arguably less about the official's son, and more about the man himself. So, let's have a look at his journey of faith.

1. Crisis faith: he comes to Jesus (4:46-48)

Jesus is back in Cana again. And just as the wedding story in chapter 2 began with a crisis, so this story begins with a crisis (4:46). At Capernaum, 20 miles or so from Cana, there was an official, possibly a Roman, a gentile, whose son was ill and about to die.

The crisis is real and horrible: his son is on his deathbed; any privilege or wealth this man has has not been able to prevent it from happening; any status he has as a military man, or as an official in the king's palace, has failed to protect the child. Parents hope for long, full lives for their children; but the first grave in the Bible was dug for a son, not a parent. For parents, there's hardly anything more frightening than thinking your children might get sick and die. And it's the prospect of that experience which drives him to travel the 20 miles across the hills to find Jesus.

The *crisis* leads to a *cry* – he pleads with Jesus to come (4:47). But the story continues with a *confrontation* (4:48). It sounds as if Jesus is detached from the man's distress. The 'you' is plural, which is why the NIV translation says 'you people'; but even so, it sounds a bit harsh given the man's predicament.

And yet, there is something very important there for us to learn. Jesus has got the reputation of being a travelling sideshow. But he's not interested in performing tricks. Maybe the official had heard stories about Jesus, about his power, about the signs he had done. John tells us that while he was in Jerusalem, he had done signs, and had got quite a following (2:23). But even so, there's something about this faith that's not quite right (2:24). And John tells us the kind of welcome he received when

he came back to Galilee (4:45). First in Jerusalem and now in Galilee, people respond to Jesus' signs with some sort of faith; but it's spurious faith, and the response is inadequate. The point seems to be that signs *can* bring about faith, and that's why John records them; but not *every* response of belief in Jesus is adequate or authentic. What we need to do is to look beyond the sign to see what it says about Jesus.

The signs are like clues in a treasure hunt. We're meant to follow the clues, because they lead somewhere. But it's always possible that people will be more interested in the clues themselves rather than the treasure they lead to. Maybe they just saw the signs and were amazed; they didn't see beyond the signs; they didn't see that the signs pointed to how God had been made flesh and was dwelling among them (1:14); they didn't see that God was so loving the world that he was giving his one and only Son, so that whoever believed in him should not perish but have eternal life (3:16)

You know how it is: the phone call comes out of the blue from someone you haven't heard from in a while, and you're not quite sure why they've called, and the conversation is friendly enough, but a little bit forced; and eventually you realise they've called because they *want* something. We don't like it when someone takes an interest in us only because of what they can get out of us! Perhaps even for this father there appears to be little interest in who Jesus is, but great hope of what Jesus can do for him.

But it's still better to reach out to Jesus in moments of selfish desperation like these, than not to reach out at all. Christian faith is *more* than that; but if that's where we start, if that's where we're coming from, we may find – because of his great love and compassion – that Jesus will meet us there. This is what the official discovers.

2. Confident faith: he takes Jesus at his word (4:49-50)

It's a *confrontation* which leads to *compassion*. Like the Canaanite woman elsewhere in the gospels, this man isn't put off, and asks Jesus again (4:49). He even calls Jesus 'sir', in the

presence of everyone. He doesn't claim any special treatment for his high position. He has nothing to lay before Jesus other than his need. He doesn't make any claim on Jesus. But the very lack of a claim makes him a candidate for Jesus' mercy. That's how it is with Jesus: 'nothing in my hand I bring, simply to thy cross I cling'. And Jesus speaks the word which says the boy will live (4:50a).

Jesus will not be taken advantage of. We saw that in chapter 2, with his mother, where he first rejects the request of help; but here as well as there, the effect of that rebuff seems to allow the one who asks to reach a higher level of faith. In both cases, Jesus eventually does something about the request, but he does so *on his own terms*, not anyone else's.

And there's no need for high drama. Just a word: 'Your son lives'. The man would have to walk home without the thing he wanted, without the thing he came for, taking Jesus at his word. Would that be enough for him? Apparently, yes (4:50b). There is no miraculous sign for the crowds to see. Jesus simply gives his word, and the man leaves without any evidence. Maybe John is already preparing us for what he will say at the end of the gospel about those who will believe without seeing.

Interestingly, the Samaritans in chapter 4 came to believe in Jesus without any sign at all! After Jesus has met the woman at the well, she becomes a missionary to her neighbours (4:39-40). Jesus spends two days there, and what happens? Verse 41 tells us – 'and because of his words many more became believers'. They believed in him. They confessed him to be the saviour of the world (4:42). They *believed* because of his *word*.

He takes Jesus at his word. Maybe there is a sense in which the man is moving forward in his faith, moving beyond seeing Jesus simply as a miracle worker, but as one who speaks with authority, whose words have the power over life and death. Faith comes by hearing the word of God, hearing what God has said, and living as if it is true, taking Jesus at his word, leaning on his promise. That's a message for today too – not to put our trust in a feeling, or an idea, or an experience, but to put it in Jesus' word. But there's more...

3. Confirmed faith: he believes in Jesus (4:51-54)

The story ends with a healing and a believing (4:51-53). The boy recovered at the exact moment Jesus had said, 'Your son lives'. It's a mark of the works of Jesus that there is no doubt whatever that the cure has occurred. The servants are so excited they've started hoofing over the hills to Cana to tell their master the news! Everyone in the family would be aware of it, and it's no wonder, then, that the whole household become believers.

But the reaction that John is concerned about is not the excitement there would have been in the house, but that the official believed. He's not saying half way through the story, 'I'll believe it when I see it!' He's setting off home, taking Jesus at his word. And he finds he has moved from *crisis* faith through *confident* faith to *confirmed* faith. He discovers what many since him have discovered, that somewhere you cross a line and you *know* you're a believer, you *know* that things will never be the same again, because of what Jesus has said and done on your behalf. All of which means we need to ask ourselves: where am I on this walk of faith?

The story isn't really about the healing of the son; it's about the believing of the official. But it actually isn't really about his belief. It's about *Jesus*: it's about seeing Jesus as the one who calls us to give up *our* claims on *him* in favour of the claim *he* makes on *us*, to trust Jesus' word, and find that our *real* need will be met by him. Amen.

Notes from a sermon preached by Antony Billington at Northolt Park Baptist Church on 4 February 2007