

# The living Church is a community, not a club

[Matthew 2:1-5](#) | 30th July 2017

The miracle, in the story, comes as Jesus instructs the man to take his bed up, and walk. This paralysed man; this sinner whose sins - in the thinking of the time - caused his physical frailty. As he encounters Jesus even in the midst of his inability to do anything for himself, he discovers he is 'ransomed, healed, restored forgiven' by the Christ who says, 'Son, your sins are forgiven.'

But maybe there's another miracle, too. Seamus Heaney's poem *Miracle* - written after he had suffered a stroke and perhaps with a poet's acute observation of a life requiring more help than before - speaks of the way the man gets to be noticed by Jesus. It is a miracle brought about through aching backs, sweaty handles and rope-burned palms.

It must also have its genesis in lateral thinking which went not sideways, but upwards. Who would have thought that going through the roof made any sense? It is unlikely the roof would have been tiled, and it certainly wouldn't slope as ours do - roofs then were a flat terrace frequently used as part of the house, made of mud and straw. Even so, it would take a deal of effort to dig through the sun-hardened clay to form an opening sufficient even to tilt a man through on a stretcher.

I'd like to explore this motif of limited destruction which gives birth to a memorable and astonishing event. If these friends had gone through official channels and applied for a building warrant, they would probably not have got one. If they

had conducted an audit they might have realized lowering someone strapped to a makeshift bed using only ropes directly above a large group in an overcrowded house had implications for health and safety. I don't think the house-owner would have been too pleased, even if the friends stayed behind to effect repairs. And what would the neighbours think?

This is not a cheap shot at regulation; I do not suggest that we should be lawbreakers. But law is more than legislation. It includes the habits we form as people together, and it finds expression in the things we instinctively do.



Here's an example. Driving east along Rouken Glen Road on Tuesday I was third in the queue on the outside lane approaching Eastwood Toll roundabout. The car immediately in front of me manoeuvred sharply to the left and squeezed between the two cars at the front of the queue. It was then I saw the car at the front of my lane had broken down. I nipped between it and the car sitting to its left and had a crisis of conscience. What was I to do? It was clear the best thing would be to get the broken-down car away from the roundabout to let the traffic flow. But do they do that in Glasgow, or are they too posh to push? If I went back, would anyone help me? How safe

would it be to push a car onto a busy roundabout? And anyway, would we leave it? I offered brief thanks that our society has such sophisticated resource management facilities and so the AA would soon be along - and drove on my way.

I reflect on my inability to do anything positive in these three ways. We tend towards specialism: someone qualified will be along to help properly so I should probably keep out of it. Second, I was on my own: had there been four of us in the car, we might collectively have worked out where to park, we would have sufficient resources within our group to have the confidence to act, and you always feel a bit more confident in a crowd. Third, more than being alone our culture tends towards individualism: my breakdown is my problem as yours is yours, so if you're stuck I'll just keep going.

As people who are engaged in a Christian church, I suggest we are called to transcend instinctive ways of thinking which restrict our ability to reach out, think creatively, and enable growth. We need limited destruction of too-fixed mindsets to enable fresh growth to flourish. It can be too easy to think of ourselves as a club, with fixed rules and long-standing traditions which narrowly define what we can do. It is too easy to repeat, without reflecting on them, past activities and have little sense of intention about why we are doing what we're doing. And we may have established or inherited roles which give us power we do not wish to relinquish, or which

imprison us such that we feel we cannot escape.

What if we committed to operate as a community rather than function as a club or a religious organisation with this strong focus on how it has always been and what rules must be followed? What if we concentrated on nurturing relationships, often in small groups where it is easier to make deeper friendships more quickly, so that many people felt accepted and were helped to grow in faith and service? Could we transcend our routine thinking so that leadership was shared amongst many people working together as teams? In partnership we might develop locally appropriate expressions of the marks of healthy churches in which the different gifts, experiences and faith journeys of all are valued and given expression in and beyond the life of the Church.

If you had asked the stretcher-bearers in the story about all this, they might have looked blankly.

Their hands were still hot, their shoulders sore and their heads swimming a bit from all the effort. If you asked them, however, what they thought they were trying to achieve, they might have found a ready answer. 'We're helping our friend to meet Jesus.'

They must have been convinced that Jesus was worth meeting.

They were quick-witted enough to spot an innovative way to make this happen. And they were committed enough to work, and groan, and sweat together to bring it about.

I'm not sure that they thought Jesus would offer forgiveness; indeed, they might not have been all that clear what Jesus was likely to do. That may be the same with us: we don't need to have all the answers, to know all the steps and to be experts in everything. But we need to put our hands to the stretcher-poles, or onto the back of the car; we need to make space in busy lives to work alongside others in

common effort which points towards God in creative, innovative ways; and we may be being called to think quite differently about how we may bring friends to meet Jesus so that they are made stronger, more whole, given hope and enabled to hear God's call to them to serve with costly devotion.

Times are different, but humans haven't changed too much. There was something else these friends had, which we understand immediately. They cared about their immobile companion. Is the miracle in the rising and walking? Perhaps. But that could not have occurred without the effort of those who knew him all along and carried him in.

'Bear one another's burdens and, in that way, fulfil the law of Christ,' Paul wrote. May this be our rule for life, that we and others may continually meet Jesus and live.

## Read further...

Seamus Heaney, *Miracle* - Available at <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/miracle-by-seamus-heaney-bf8jc27zr0j>