19th Sunday after Trinity
Rolling Meadows - 1965

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IN NOMINE JESU

St. Matthew 9: 6 But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins - He then said to the paralytic - Rise, take up your bed and go home.

THE AUTHORITY OF CHRIST

St. Mark begins his Gospel with a keen insight into the tremendous impact which Jesus' preaching had on people: The were astonished at His teaching, for He taught them as One who had authority, and not as the scribes. By His words and actions and manner Jesus had made a powerful impression on these people. He spoke very differently from other preachers. And it was not just that He spoke more passionately, more forcefully, more persuasively - or that He knew more of the things of God. The scribes too very earnestly declared the will of God in His Law, speaking of the Fatherly love with which He seeks us, of His forgiveness and of His covenant with men. Jesus handled the same themes, but in a surprisingly different way. As He spoke, He entered into the things of God in an active and creative way which changed the whole situation. Thus, when He met a guilty man, He did not preach a sermon or deliver a lecture on the theme that God is a Judge before whom he must perish, but that God is also merciful and will perhaps justify him in His grace if he will only have the right attitute toward Him. No, Jesus tells such a guilty man directly and authoritatively: Your sins are forgiven. And as He says this the man knows that his chains have fallen off, that he can stand up and go away a new creature. When Jesus speaks we have more than a word; we have an enactment, a creative deed which makes things new.

We must also consider the way in which Jesus deals with sorrow in the world, with anxiety, sickness and death. Preachers can say that the day of God is coming when tears shall be wiped away and there shall be no more sorrow or crying. But when Jesus arrives things are different. The lame literally rise up and begin to walk; the eyes of the blind are opened; the poor are made merry and the oppressed begin to praise God. When Jesus arrives the atmosphere is full of intimations of what God will one day do fully and unmistakably. The dawning of the new day of God may be seen already on the horizon.

When people see all these things, they are forced to ask Him who He really is and from what source He has this power. Even the sceptics and critics of Christianity have to say that Jesus is absolutely different from ourselves. They may reject Him in unbelief. They may call Him a blasphemer. They may insinuate that He performs His miracles by Beelzebub, the chief of the devils. But they cannot deny His authority. They cannot deny His mysterious power over men and things.

So men have to take their stand, either for Him or against Him. So they have pressed Him throughout the centuries, trying to unlock His secret. You have kindled a fire on earth Jesus of Nazareth. It sweeps around the globe, jumps across the seas and penetrates the most distant continents. Even 2000 years after You have walked the face of the earth it can still do this. You have power, Jesus of Nazareth. There is no doubt about this, for no man has exerted so much influence. Millions have been imprisoned, thrown to the lions and executed for You, and have praised You with their dying breath. There is no doubt that you have power - power such as no mortal man possessed. Caesars and dictators have established kingdoms to last forever. They have strengthened their frontiers, raised mighty armies and had themselves extolled as saviors. But all their glory has vanished with the wind. New cultures and new kingdoms have arisen, and they, too, have had the mark of destruction upon them. Their brilliant rise has always been followed by their decline. This is human destiny, and always will be. But You have remained, Jesus of Nazareth. Yet you had no kingdom of military power. You did not summon the twelve legions of angels to establish Your earthly rule. You had a few disciples who at the critical hour in your life failed to understand You and fled. You died on a gallows in a poor and insignificant country, and world history strode over You. But no - You strode over world history. We still hear Your step. The dying on hospital beds and battlefields look up when You come in their last hour. The faces of the guilty brighten when You take off their chains. The anxious and careworn find rest when they hear Your voice: Fear not! Take hear

Yes, Jesus, you have remained puzzling. You often seem to have been buried. But You have always come forth from the sealed tomb and caused men to realize that You are the Savior and the secret Ruler of the world.

Thus men in all ages speak with Jesus, and they finally ask Him: By what authority do You do these things? Do you have some sinister hold on people? Are You a genius at handling men that You can bind them to you to live and die for You? Are you a clever psychologist, a skilled manipulator of souls, that you exploit the religious needs of men and make Yourself indispensable to the generations? Or - are You the Son of God? Are You the Wholy Other? Are You alone from above, whereas we are all from below? Does God's Fatherly heart beat in You when You stoop to the sick and poor? Does God's hand act in Yours when You lay it in healing on wounded cousciences and diseased bodies? Who are You?

So the question still confronts us today. Is Jesus merely a point in the history of religion - just a part of its complicated development? May we not suppose that a new religion will come more suited to our technical age, more modern, more adapted to include the various viewpoints that we should like to see included? Do we not live today in an interval between Christianity and a coming religion. Or - is Jesus the One who will someday come from the other direction to meet history when it reaches its end? Is He the Only One who shall meet the great host of humanity from the other side? Is He the Son of Man; the King with the sickle and the crown, who on His day will come on the clouds of heaven and will be proclaimed King of kings and Lord of lords? Everything depends on the answer to this question. It decides, for example, what the Christian Church is, whether it is just another among the many religions of the world, or whether it is an institution against which the gates of hell shall not prevail. It also decides the question of what the Bible is, whether it is a literary product of antiquarian value or the Book of Life with all the consolations of this world and the next.

How can we know? One thing ought to be obvious: A miracle never yet brought anyone to faith. It can always be explained in some other way. We have

not one word that the scribes were any different or that they changed their minds about Jesus after He raised the paralytic. The people were afraid, and they glorified God, who had given such power to men - but we are not told that they believed in Him as their Savior and Lord, that they took the leap of faith. There are some things in life which can be known only when we are in earnest and engage in them. War is an example. We may watch television and all the horrors of war in Viet Nam and the terror of bombing. Yet those who watch cannot really say that they know what war is. Such knowledge is not to be gained by watching T.V. To know what war is one has to be plunged into the venture of life, into mortal anguish, into anxiety for loved ones, into deadly sorrow. The spectator of this bloody and chaotic drama cannot really know what war is.

Thus we can see the difference between this paralytic and his friends and the rest of the crowd. They believed Jesus could help them. They were prepared seriously and publicly to make their confession of faith before men, even though they might be laughed at and mocked by the scribes and the rest of the people, even though it might all have been for nothing! Under great hardship and inconvenience to themselves, the came, carrying bed and paralytic and all. And immediately we are told, Jesus saw their faith! He Who is the searcher of hearts, who knows our inmost thoughts, saw the guilt, the inner anxiety, the restless torment, the feeling of insecurity and worthlessness & homesickness that filled this man's soul, and He said with the Voice of final authority: Take heart, my son, your sins are forgiven! & bothered him more than his paralysis

What stands between men and Christ is not intellectual arguments but sins. They are not willing to give up this or that. They want special reservatio and privileges before God. Hence they will not accept Christ because of the consequences. But those who want only a non-committal belief in God, which costs nothing, need not be surprised if they sit before an empty stage and miss the decisive question of their lives. Only those who do the will of My Father in heaven, said Jesus, will know from Whom I have My authority, whether My doctrine is of God and who I am. Those who love Him thus and dare to take the leap of

faith - those who dare to lay bare their soul and become a sinner before Him - those who can say in the midst of all the changes and chances of life, Yet I am still with Thee; I am still Thy loving child even though Thy face is withdrown for a moment and the storm clouds of suffering hang like a dark veil over my life - those who love Him with all their heart and soul and strength - those who give themselves to Him and venture all on Him - those who throw themselves down before Him and say, Do with me as Thou wilt - those who love Him thus He will not cast out, nor will their faith be in vain. To those who love Him thus He will appear as the One to whom all power is given in heaven and in earth, and they will see Him as the One who has full authority to forgive sins and to break all chains. I close with some Gospel words of Matthias Claudius: He that will not believe in Christ must see to it how he can get along without him. As for you and me, we cannot. We need Someone who will lift and hold us up when are are alive and who will lay His hand beneath our heads when we must die, and this He can do abundantly according to what is written about Him, and we know of nobody whom we'd rather have do it! Amen.