



Matthew 4:24–25

24 News about him spread all over Syria, and people brought to him all who were ill with various diseases, those suffering severe pain, the demon-possessed, those having seizures, and the paralysed; and he healed them. 25 Large crowds from Galilee, the Decapolis, Jerusalem, Judea and the region across the Jordan followed him.

Did you know that Time magazine recently

nominated Jesus as the most influential person in all of human history? Best estimates tell us that there have been 108 billion people to have ever lived. And Time magazine places Jesus right at the top – number one out of 108 billion people. Think of all the people who have been forgotten in that 108 billion, tens of thousands of great people forgotten, and yet Jesus, who tops the list, is bigger today 2000 years on than he has ever been.

Many people believe that Jesus is the most significant person to ever live because of his great moral teaching. But you know this is simply historically naïve. Yesterday we saw Jesus come teaching, preaching and healing and today we see the response to him is stunning. People come rushing to see him from all over Syria, from all over Galilee, from the Decapolis, from Jerusalem, from Judea and

the region of Perea which was across the Jordan. Huge crowds rush out to see him, but not to hear his great moral teaching, they come to be healed. It's historically naïve to think that Jesus' great moral teaching caused such a stir, it wasn't his teaching, it was his miracles – and here's why.

Did you know in the time of Jesus that the average life expectancy was 25 years of age? Today it's over 80, but back then it was 25 years. This didn't mean that there was no-one over 25. There were people in their thirties and forties and fifties and very rarely even in their sixties and seventies but average life expectancy was 25. Infant mortality was huge, over 50% of children died. Many mothers died in child birth. And there were no hospitals and very few effective medicines back then. This meant that a common cold was

often a death sentence. A fever was like the shadow of death over an entire household. Death was commonplace. In today's western society few people have actually seen someone die in person. Back then, death, dead bodies were commonplace. So is it any wonder that these huge crowds rushed to a man that was demonstrating that he had power over death?

And this isn't even to mention all of the curable diseases and ailments that would have run rampant; skin diseases, unnecessary blindness and everything else. Our passage lists them: various diseases (can you imagine what's included in this), those suffering severe pain – have you ever suffered severe unrelenting pain, chronic pain, is there anything worse, imagine no prospect of relief through pain killers – the demon possessed, many

would have been suffering mental illnesses, but many more would have had something far more sinister living inside them, this seems to have been especially prevalent in the time of Jesus. And the list goes on, there were people having seizures and people who were paralysed. Imagine being paralysed in that society, where you walked everywhere.

Can you see these huge crowds? Their pain, their desperation, a glimmer of hope? Even for paralysed people to be carried from far away regions to Jesus. These people weren't interested in moral teaching, they weren't sitting there taking notes while they listened to a lecture on ethics, they'd come to be healed. Now sure, some of them would have come because no-one has ever spoken like this; some of them would have recognised wisdom like the world has never seen in Jesus words; and

many would have come for the spectacle, but most of them came because they were going to die soon and this man could well mean for them the difference between life and death.

Now sure, there is a theological point to be made here, but before we do please don't miss the human element of what's going on here. Here's Jesus reaching out and touching people with skin diseases, covered in rags, outcasts from society. They haven't felt the touch of another human in years. Jesus touches them. And he heals them, free to re-join families who'd given them up for dead. Families they'd left so that their disease would spare the ones they loved. Then there's mothers, who've lost many, many children and then there only surviving daughter, who'd made it to twelve ... well now she's sick and on the verge of the death. Healed. Think how

that mother would feel. And then people in chronic, maddening, incessant pain – no relief, and then relief, blissful, life-changing relief at the hands of Jesus.

Can you imagine the queues of poor, desperate people? Can you see the good that Jesus is doing? He would have worked to exhaustion, his disciples would have had to tear him away. When to stop? How could you stop? And how do you think Jesus felt, God's precious children, in all sorts of agony, and pain and suffering because of sin that has so marred God's good creation. They would have had to tear him away with tears streaming down his cheeks. And yet he would have steeled himself as well. You see Jesus didn't come to treat the symptoms, he came to heal the disease. And he would have drawn from those moments the resolve he needed to contin-

ue his mission, a mission that would see him tortured and beaten beyond recognition, and die in agony on a Roman cross, so that he could put an end to suffering and sin and death forever.

The theological point is that Jesus' message of the kingdom was validated by these healings; but in the end it was theology that brought people to Jesus, they came to him out of desperate need. They were dying and he offered them life. Today people are still in desperate need, they're dying when Jesus offers them life. Today the need is just as great. There are seven billion people in our world today which means that more than one in twenty people who have ever lived are alive today. And we're all dying and Jesus is offering us all life – which means there's more urgency

than ever. What can you do about it? Death has been defeated and soon God will bring an end to pain and suffering once and for all. This is the good news that our world so desperately needs to hear, how can you and I somehow cut through and help them hear it?

Please wrestle with thoughts like these for a while, think hard and deeply and seriously over them. Then spend some time praying to our great God, who has everything in hand, and who even now is working in everything for the good of those whom he has called. Ask him how you can better work alongside him. And you know it might be as simple as beginning by noticing those around you who are really suffering right now and in need of a saviour. Perhaps through some kindness, and compassion, and a few words from you, they

might see their needs met in Jesus and come rushing to him like those in our passage.

Well tomorrow, it begins – the Sermon on the Mount. I really hope you can join me for it.