

THE HOLE IN THE ROOF

A reimagining of Luke 5:17-26 and Mark 2:1-12

The boy carries his burden carefully; water is too precious to spill on the dusty road. Every step is painful, not only because of the weight of the jar but because he was born with one leg shorter than the other, twisting his joints and contorting his frame. Arriving at the village, he sees a crowd of people ahead of him trying to push through the door to one of the houses. He limps cautiously nearer to see what is going on, careful not to come too close, anxious not to be noticed: his disability is reckoned a punishment from God – for why else would he have been made this way? – and anyone who touches him would share in his offence.

It is dark inside the house, shaded from the heat of the sun. Although the boy can see little he is aware that someone is speaking to a packed audience. He cannot catch the words but he can hear snatches of conversation among those outside. The speaker, it seems, is notorious for miles around: some are saying that he is a great prophet possessed of wonderful healing powers, even a miracle worker; others scoff that he is merely the son of a local labourer.

Suddenly there is a commotion by the door. The boy sees several people trying to force an entry, and to his surprise the crowd has drawn back, leaving a little space around them. Now, the reason for this becomes clear: four of the would-be gate crashers are carrying a mat on which lies a paralysed man. The boy watches with keen interest; here is someone with a disability even worse than his own – a man who cannot walk at all – but who has four able-bodied friends ready to share his shame in order to reach help for him.

There is no way that five of them can squeeze into the overcrowded house. Already there are complaints and angry cries threatening to have them forcibly removed. Presently the men carrying the mat abandon their attempt and move away, while the crowd surges forward round the door again. The boy is about to continue on his errand when a noise overhead makes him stop and set down the water jar once more. Everyone looks up to see that the group with the paralysed man has reappeared on the roof of the house. Three of the men seem to be trying to break a hole in it, ripping and tearing at the fabric, while the fourth stands ready to

repel anyone who dares to climb up and stop them.

Some of the onlookers step back to get a better view, their attention now so firmly fixed on the roof that the boy risks creeping right up to the door. Here, he can just make out the speaker and is disappointed to see nothing that distinguishes this 'prophet' as anyone special, let alone a miracle worker: he wears the shabby clothes of a peasant, and for all his fame is not ashamed to mix with the local riff-raff.

At that moment there is a loud crash, causing those inside the house to cry out in alarm as bits of debris start to fall on their heads. A gaping hole appears in the ceiling through which the man on the mat is bundled unceremoniously to land in a heap at the speaker's feet. The boy holds his breath: to rub shoulders with the poor and needy is one thing, but to be forced into such close proximity to this paralysed wretch must be going too far. He is shocked at the audacity of these four men, and marvels at the value they place on a beggar imprisoned in his own immobile body. Surely, if the speaker is indeed a prophet, he will be angry now and might use his powers to smite them all.

When the dust has settled, a bright shaft of sunlight illuminates the room as it never has before. Then, to the boy's astonishment, the prophet raises the paralysed man in his arms and embraces him. Suddenly, the boy's eyes are opened wide as if for the very first time. The light penetrates the darkness of his mind and flows in a blessing over his misshapen body. He sees that this great prophet, by counting himself no better than a paralysed sinner, has proclaimed that everyone is equally precious: for if the roof of a house cannot put a ceiling on compassion, then not even the sky can put a limit on the boundless mercy of the One who created them all.

The boy hoists the water jar once more and goes limping on his way, no longer caring who notices him: for now he feels a little taller, and there is even the hint of a swagger in his gait.