

Walk Free

Mark 2:1-12

12th Sunday after Pentecost

4th September 2011

Here's a question for you. Do you think it is right and proper for the spouse of a member of parliament to appear on a TV reality show? The question may seem rather odd but that's exactly the one that has been a hot topic of debate in the British tabloids over the past few weeks when Sally Bercow, the wife of the Speaker of the House of Commons, appeared on *Celebrity Big Brother*.

Many were shocked and indignant that Mrs. Bercow, a parliamentarian's wife, did not know her place was to be seen and not heard. Yet others argued that women, no matter to whom they are married, should be allowed to lead their own public life, whatever that may be. Some were mollified by the fact that Mrs. Bercow gave her £100,000 appearance fee to the National Autistic Society, having a 5 year old autistic son herself. Yet others declared that the wife of the Speaker was cheapening herself and the office her husband holds. She was asked in one interview what her husband felt about all this and replied, "My marriage is frosty but I have no regrets ... He'd rather I was a stay-at-home wife, but after 20 years he knows what I'm like and, while he doesn't like it, he accepts if he didn't let me do any media our relationship would be doomed."¹

Now, I can understand people choosing to watch the *Big Brother* show, whether in the UK or here in Canada, if a well-known, controversial celebrity makes an appearance. But I have always had difficulty understanding the attraction of the show from week to week. Why do people keep watching it just to see people scheming against each other and having big arguments.

So I consulted the resident *Big Brother* expert in our household and was told that it is very complex and that I wouldn't understand. However, my advisor tells me that, currently, the favourite is Jeff but that it will be an utter disaster if Rachel wins. Doesn't mean anything to me but I am sure that any *Big Brother* fans in the congregation will know about whom we are talking, and will agree or disagree as to the eventual outcome.

I suppose the real reason for watching *Big Brother*, of course, has its roots in the same mental and emotional processes as take place when we watch any show on TV. Or also when we read a book, a novel, a biography. Or even read a story in the newspaper. It's all about character identification, isn't it? Constantly, as we watch or read, or get caught up in any human story, our antenna search for someone with whom we can find common cause, whose situation reminds us of our own, whose personality resonates with our personality, who is doing something we would like to do, or being the person we would like to be. It's human nature to identify with others. To see ourselves in others.

I wonder if you have ever started to read a book and

you just can't "get into it"? If so, it's more than likely because you can't find a character with whom to identify. It may be a great plot, taking place in the most beautiful surroundings, the dialogue may be gripping, but if you can't find a character who intrigues you or with whom you have any empathy, then you will swiftly lose interest. A good book or a good TV show or a good movie is one that quickly gets you involved with the main character to the point that you begin to agree with their opinions, feel their emotions, sympathise with their weaknesses and to a certain extent see something of yourself in that person, to see your alter ego, a projection of yourself, your feelings and aspirations.²

The same kind of character identification also happens, of course, when we read the Biblical stories. Who among has not felt sympathy for multi-colour-cloaked Joseph victimised by his brothers because of the favouritism of his father? Or, when we are up against the odds in life, do we not see something of ourselves in the boy David as he stands alone against Goliath? Or, when we feel the world is against us, do we not sympathise greatly with Job? Or don't we have a great fellow feeling with Simon of Cyrene singled out of the crowd to carry Jesus' cross? Or, in our moments of weakness, don't we see ourselves in Peter as he promises his loyalty to Jesus but quickly reneges on it? Or, maybe as we see St. Paul spurned by the very people he has brought to Christ, we see something of ourselves in this man as we face times of rejection.

Or, how about the story we read this morning from Mark's Gospel? About the paralysed man being lowered through the roof.³ Even here, as we ponder these events, no doubt we will find those in this mini-drama with whom to identify.

Perhaps, because we love to help others, we might see ourselves as one of the four men, taking the sick fellow to Jesus, determined to use any ingenuity to help this man because he's our friend. Or, perhaps if we have long sought treatment for a chronic medical condition, we see ourselves as one of the many health-seekers cramped into that hot and stuffy room, pleading to get to the front to feel the healing hand of Jesus. Or, maybe, because we love being a spectator at big events, we see ourselves as one of the crowd. Never getting involved but always enjoying being close to where the action is, seeing what's going on so, later, we can impress others with a little bit of meaty gossip.

I'll bet, though, there is one person in this story – if, supposing we didn't know how it ended – with whom we wouldn't readily or immediately identify and that is the victim lying helplessly on the mat. The paralysed man. The man unable to do anything to get himself treatment. We don't want to have anything to do with him. We distance

ourselves from him. He's the man with the problem. We don't know if anything can be done to help him. Maybe he's beyond all hope.

However, commentator Carl Schenk challenges us to consider that, of all the people in this story, we may well be that fellow on the mat. "Though we may be healthy and prosperous," he says, "everyone is crippled in some way. Everyone has brokenness in his or her life. Everyone has chronic hurt or pain of some sort. In that sense, we are all the paralytic."⁴

I wonder what it is that might place you on the mat in that story? It might be a physical problem but, then again, it might be something else in your mind, or heart or soul. What is it that paralyzes you in life? In a book entitled *Shame and Grace*, Lewis Smedes lists certain paralyzing behaviours that cripple our psyches.⁵

"Over-responsibility" is one where we constantly feel we have to control things beyond our own sphere of influence. We are constantly involved in other people's lives because we somehow feel responsible for their actions as well as our own.

As another writer says, "You are being over-responsible when you: 1) Take responsibility for the feelings and choices of others. 2) Judge the decisions, feelings, and thoughts of others. 3) Take credit (good or bad) for others. 4) Give unsolicited advice (verbally or non-verbally!) 5) Compromise what you believe is healthy for you. 6) Blame others for your life's choices, situations, or results."⁶

And the net result is that because of our constant feelings of over-responsibility we become paralysed, paralysed by our over-involvement in the lives of others. So much so that we then become unable to do those things that are within our own power and sphere of influence, those things that are for our own good.

"Compulsive comparing" is another paralyzing behaviour. Lewis Medes says that so often people look at those around and find them more charming, more attractive, more capable than they are. So they are paralysed in terms of giving of their best. How can they achieve anything worthwhile, they think, when it will never measure up to what others can do. And this paralyzing behaviour is not just confined to people's individual lives. We also find it in the church. People who never give of themselves to their church because, compared to other churches around, theirs is never quite as good, or as active, or as friendly, or as committed as they perceive other congregations to be.

"Approval addiction" is another source of paralysis in many people, Smedes finds. "Approval addicts," he says, "are people who are never quite at peace until they have met everyone else's expectations. They have to have everyone's Good House-Keeping Seal of Approval or they just can't seem to cope."⁷ Unless such people constantly have their egos stroked and are told what a good job they are doing, they are more than likely to be in a bad mood and unable to live life in a rich and meaningful way.

Maybe, today, you see yourself in this story as the man lying on that mat. Your disabilities differ but you can identify. Maybe it's over-responsibility, or compulsive caring, or approval addiction that paralyzes you. Or, on the other hand, maybe it's anger, or denial, or chronic pessimism, or the inability to forgive, or the lack of love.

Whatever it is that cripples you, Jesus is addressing you personally right now. Just in the same way he spoke to the man on the stretcher. Not that he is offering analysis or advice or aversion therapy or a set of behaviour-modification techniques. No, he simply calls you out of your paralysis and tells you to get up. And, intuitively, you recognise his power. You respond in faith. And miracle of miracles, suddenly you find you can walk! That you can walk free!

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¹Rachel Tarley, "My marriage is frosty but I have no Big Brother regrets", MetroOnline, 31st August, 2011

<http://www.metro.co.uk/tv>

²Mark O'Bannon, "Identification",

www.betterstorytelling.net/thebasics/identification.html

³Mark 2:1-12

⁴Dr. Carl L. Schenk, "Walk", www.sermonmall.com, 20 February 2000

⁵Lewis Smedes, *Shame and Grace - Healing The Shame We Don't Deserve*, Harper, San Francisco, 1994,

www.sermonmall.com, 20 February 2000

⁶Jo-Ann Downey, "Over-responsibility",

<http://verysmartgirls.com/wellness/over-responsibility>

⁷Ibid