

John 5: 1-9 the healing of the man at the pool

Prayer

Do you want to be made well? What kind of a question is that? Of course – surely everyone wants to be healthy and fit don't they? Or is it that being sick means you can stay dependent and avoid responsibilities that come with good health?

Quite a thought isn't it? Jesus meets this character who has been sick for 38 years, 38 YEARS, lying on his mat at a colonnaded pool. There were many others, maybe seeking fellowship with others like themselves. But we note that Jesus singled out ONE, he did not heal them all. Which reminds us of John's purpose in writing this Gospel and therefore gives us guidance in looking at this text, we read at the end of the Gospel account '.. these [signs] are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.' (20:31) The purpose for the work of Christ that John is underlining is leading people to faith in Him– the healings are one such sign towards that end.

(The bit about the *angel* stirring the waters up so the first person in the disturbed water would be healed isn't very likely, it isn't in some manuscripts so it looks like an added bit of colour or local myth to an otherwise historically credible location and a fitting story.) The stirring mentioned was probably bubbly spring water with some efficacious properties. Anyway, the porticoed pool was a safe sheltered spot for sick people to gather and *hope*. 'If I could just get in there first when it bubbles up – I might just be cured.'

In the meantime, it must be said, there is the possibility of alms. A person can make a living out of begging. Which of course, *can* become a way of life that stifles initiative.

It may be that Jesus had spotted the psychological need of this particular invalid, some paralysis emotionally as well– why else would he pick this one out? This one that showed no great enthusiasm for the itinerant preacher and healer; no recognition of the out of the ordinariness of Jesus. This one that seemed not only to have a bit of 'attitude' but we'll see if we read on, also a lack of gratitude! Why him? 'Do you want to be well? Jesus asks. The lame man doesn't say. In fact, the man comes up with an excuse, he by passes the question. 'I have no-one to help me...', he complains in response.

I'm sure we could identify people who are like this invalid. People who have become so used to a poor quality of life, that they almost hug the familiarity of sickness. The world out there is scary and taking control of ones life is hard. I remember a lady back in my home town who had had ME for years and years...she used to take her own particular foods to social events and, I noted, ate a crafty extra from what was laid out for all. She admitted to me that she wasn't sure she had the courage to be well, to embrace all that life had to offer, she could be quite evasive about new possibilities of help. That is sad but hardly unknown. I learned more about her and found she had a difficult marriage, she had a lot of struggles in her background, so being laid up in her nice comfortable home was a security blanket, a way out of taking risks or steps of faith that might hurt.

Of course such steps might also enable her to really blossom. It is such a character that Jesus chose for his continuing demonstration of God's power. Showing another of His signs pointing to himself.

Clearly Jesus is not choosing or judging by how much faith a person has in order to heal. This one didn't demonstrate any! He didn't even answer Jesus' question. But evasively complains that he has no-one to help him. In a busy public place? No-one who is willing to help? Or maybe no-one he is willing to receive help from? Is pride getting in his way or what? There were certainly enough people around. So a good person to ask the question: 'do you *want* to be made well.'

We often hear don't we, have faith and this or this will happen'. But what if you don't have any, like this character? On the subject of having faith for healing – I remember reading of the priest David Watson writing when being challenged about this. 'Don't *you* have enough faith to be healed?' When he was suffering with what was ultimately terminal cancer. 'Oh yes', he said, 'I have faith enough to be healed – but I'm not sure if I have enough faith to stay sick if that is God's plan for me.' There's another way of looking at it! Jesus did not heal the others.

Jesus sign of healing was performed for someone who had no recognition of him, and clearly no belief. And this healing was undertaken on the Sabbath – the day on which no 'work' should be done, which included carrying anything like a humble mat. (he made me blustered the man when later challenged by the Jews!). Jesus was exercising mercy and compassion for sure. But more -

He asks the question 'do you want to be made well?' And heals him despite the lack of positive response.

There is much in this passage that may indicate the context of Jewish culture and religious understanding (we won't go into all that now) including the idea of the healing waters. But, later on in this chapter we see that the healed man is found in the Temple. He has hung on to his traditional belief, it hasn't exactly been brilliant for him but it is familiar. But we know that he has failed to identify the *new* covenant healer, the Messiah – Jesus himself. The healed man's failure is not, as the Jews thought, breaking the law on the Sabbath, but unbelief.

Interesting the comparison with the character of Lydia in our reading of the encounter with Paul and his companions. Paul 'faithfully' responds to a call to go and preach in Macedonia. They go on the Sabbath by the river, anticipating a place of prayer. This town is under Roman power so they have discovered the place where folk could go to pray. Here, outside of the predominant culture and belief systems is a group of women, headed it would appear by Lydia, who go against the grain and then who do recognise the truth of Paul's message of Christ *and* are happy to believe and receive. The Old did not constrain them as with the lame man; they embraced the new in the Living God.

So, the failure is not breaking the contemporary religious laws but unbelief. What about today? It is still failure to acknowledge need, a failure to recognise we actually need 'saving' ourselves – which is pretty amazing considering the state of the world, let alone the frailty of human personal wellbeing! It is also a failure to recognise THE healer, the saviour.

If we read on we see that Jesus challenges the cured man to 'stop sinning so that nothing worse happens to you.' Stop your unbelief. See who it is who is before you and performing these signs and wonders. See who it is who teaches with authority. And as John put in his prologue, '... to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God.' (1:12) and the famous verse in chapter 3 'For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him [trusts, commits themselves to, receives...] may not perish but have eternal life.' Stop sinning, stop this unbelief so that you may find eternal life.

Being well is more than being cured of our physical or emotional ailment. Being well is being close to God, *in* Christ, our relationship restored. But first we humans have to recognise our brokenness and our separation from God. For some that is the challenge. We also have to recognise the ever compassionate Saviour Jesus Christ – he who alone has the wherewithal by the work of the cross and the giving of the Holy Spirit to ‘make well’. In believing and receiving Him we can flourish and enjoy a quality of life with purpose and meaning in the now (still working on it!) and the not yet of eternity. Amen