

DO YOU WANT TO BE MADE WELL?

Acts 16. 9-15

Revelation 21. 10, 22-27; 22. 1-5

John 5. 1-9

I speak to you in the name of  the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.
Amen.

Today's gospel passage takes us to a very interesting spot in Jerusalem. The place is the Sheep Gate, which still stands today. It was called as such because the shepherds would drive their sheep into Jerusalem through this gate and on over to the Pool of Beth-zatha on the right, where the sheep would be washed before being taken to the Temple for sacrifice. The Pool of Beth-zatha was separated by a dividing wall in the middle, creating two bodies of water. The sheep were washed at one end of the pool, and people bathed at the other end.

Around the sides of the pool where people bathed, there were five porticoes and, under the porticoes, people of various infirmities gathered in the hopes of being healed. As St John tells us, in these porticoes 'lay many invalids – blind, lame and paralysed' (5. 3). The Pool of Beth-zatha, otherwise known as the Pool of Bethesda, actually means 'house of grace' or 'house of mercy'.

It turns out that the pool of Beth-zatha was fed by an underground spring, and when the spring overflowed, it would bubble up from beneath, causing a disturbance in the waters above. If you look at the gospel text in your weekly bulletin, you will see that verse 4 is missing from the page; and in some biblical manuscripts, verse 4 reads: 'For an angel of the Lord went down at certain seasons into the pool, and stirred up the water; whoever stepped in first after the stirring of the water was made well from whatever disease that person had.' In our Lord's day, it was thought that the rippling

of the waters in the pool was caused by the fluttering of angels' wings, so that the first person to enter the turbulent waters would be cured.

It is before this pool that Jesus finds a man who has been ill for thirty-eight years. Many people, when they first read the text, assume that the man had been waiting by the pool for thirty-eight years; and that he was lame or a cripple. But that is not what our text says. The man has been ill for a very long time; and he has been by the pool for a long time. He is weak, feeble and unable to stand; probably because of some wasting disease such as cancer, tuberculosis or multiple sclerosis.

Now this poor man is perhaps the least willing and the least grateful of all the people Christ heals in John's gospel. When our Lord sees him lying there, he says to him, 'Do you want to be made well?' We might expect a resounding 'yes' as an answer. Instead, the man offers a complaint: 'Sir, I have no one to put me into the pool when the water is stirred up; and while I am making my way, someone else steps down ahead of me' (5. 7). Jesus responds to the man's complaint by saying, 'Stand up, take your mat and walk'. Immediately the man is healed and takes up his mat and walks. At the end of verse 9, the narrator adds, 'Now that day was a sabbath'. This is where our lectionary reading ends, but the attentive reader or hearer will recognise that this is not the end of the story. As is always the case, Christ's healing of someone on the Sabbath creates problems.

As the story progresses, the man will be confronted by 'the Jews', that is, the Jewish religious authorities, who tell him that because it is the Sabbath, it is not lawful to carry his mat (5. 10). The man responds that he is only doing what the man who healed him told him to do. When asked who it was who healed him, the man responds that he does not know (5. 11-13).

Later our Lord encounters the healed man in the Temple,¹ and then the healed man proceeds to tell the Jewish authorities that it was Jesus who healed him. So the authorities begin to persecute Christ because he has healed on the Sabbath (5. 14-16). When our Lord tells them that he is simply doing the work of his Father, the Jewish authorities seek all the more to kill Jesus, ‘because he was not only breaking the Sabbath, but was also calling God his own Father, thereby making himself equal to God’ (5. 17-18).

If ever we are tempted to think that God’s healing depends on the quality or quantity of a person’s faith, this passage offers a strong corrective. The man whom Christ heals shows no sign of faith in him, or of gratitude for what our Lord has done for him. When confronted by the religious authorities about carrying his mat on the Sabbath, the man deflects blame to the man who healed him, whose name he has not even bothered to learn. And when he meets Jesus again and learns his name, he immediately tells the authorities the identity of the man they seek. Perhaps the man thinks that if the authorities go after Christ, they will leave him alone.

The religious authorities are convinced that our Lord is a sinner because he heals on the Sabbath. From the perspective of John’s gospel, however, unbelief is the fundamental sin; it is rejection of the One sent by God. When Jesus meets the healed man in the temple, he tells him, ‘See, you have been made well! Do not sin anymore, so that nothing worse happens to you’ (5. 14).

The ‘sin’ that Christ refers to is the sin of unbelief. There are worse things than being reproached by religious authorities for breaking the Sabbath. If the man persists in his unbelief and indifference to our Lord, he risks incurring the judgement of God, which matters far more than that of the religious authorities.

¹ Where he had presumably gone to offer thanks for his healing.

This man, though he has been made well, seems blind to the power and presence of God in Jesus; and more concerned about his standing with those in positions of earthly power. He wastes no time in reporting Christ's identity to the authorities, presumably knowing that they will turn their judgement on him. The good that our Lord does is met not with faith or gratitude, but with persecution. Yet Jesus continues doing the life-giving work of his Father, regardless of the consequences.

One might wonder why Christ chose to heal this particular man, rather than all the other invalids lying around the pool of Beth-zatha. It seems that he could have made a better choice! Yet here we see that the compassion and healing power of our Lord are not reserved only for those who are 'deserving'; for those whose faith is great; and for those who respond to healing by believing in and following Jesus. Certainly Christ heals such people also. But here our Lord heals one whose lack of faith leads him to cooperate with those who persecute Jesus, and who even seek to kill him (5. 18).

John's gospel does not answer the question of why certain people are healed and others are not. Yet this passage makes it clear that healing is not a matter of having 'enough' faith (as if that could be measured). That is not how Christ operates. Clearly our Lord does not heal for the benefits to himself, in terms of gratitude, praise or devotion. He heals people simply because this is the work of his Father (5. 17).

The God whom Jesus makes known is the God who does not discriminate in giving good gifts. He is the God who wills that all may have life, and have it abundantly. And it is this same God, who says to us today, 'Do you want to be made well?'

Do we?

Amen.