**DO YOU WANT TO CHANGE? John 5**

Two weeks ago I was by the Pool of Bethesda. So often in the Holy Land I find myself saying a gospel incident happened ‘here or hereabouts’. ‘A hundred yards either way,’ is one of my favourite phrases. But here we’re on solid ground. This is where it happened, that event in our gospel reading today.

For hundreds of years scholars had suggested the 5 porticos mentioned by John in his gospel was just a way of making a connection with the five books of the Law of Moses – Genesis, Exodus etc. because there was no sign of any actual porticos. But then in the 1930s archaeologists discovered (guess what?) a pool with five porticos. Or rather two pools with four porticos, covered corridors, four down the sides and one across the middle between them. This is the place.

There’s a wonderful Crusader church next to it, 12th century, with the most fabulous acoustic. We sang there – it had an 8 second echo. And it was magical. Even my singing was transformed.

And transformation is what this story of Jesus is about. How he found a man down there by the pool who had a hard luck story he lived by. He’d been there with his withered limbs, he said, for 38 years. Those waters were healing waters, and every so often they would be disturbed and you had to get in fast to get the benefit. And he couldn’t get there. He didn’t want a bridge over troubled waters; he wanted to get **into** those troubled waters, but he had no one to help.

We’ve long known of the curative power of waters in our spa towns. Waters get stirred up by a bubbling spring and the minerals in them can offer healing, particularly to those with rheumatic diseases. Think of Bath, Buxton, Harrogate. So it’s not surprising to find lots of invalids lying in the porticos around the Pool of Bethesda.

What is surprising perhaps is the attitude of the man Jesus meets that day. If he’d been here that long surely he could have worked out some way of getting into those waters… So, as ever, Jesus cuts in with the question that goes to the heart of the matter.

‘Do you want to be made well?’ It sounds brutal. Of course he wants to be made well.

Or does he?

If he was going to be made well he’d have to change his life completely. He would no longer have his status as ‘tragic victim’; his ‘poor me’ story would no longer attract sympathy and charity. He’d have to go out and get a job, be independent, be a responsible citizen participating in the life of the city. *He’d have to re-think who he was.*

Jesus was saying to that man, ‘you have to count the cost. If you’re made well it’s going to change everything. Are you ready for that?’ As ever, Jesus unerringly asks the question that sounds so innocent but actually cuts to the chase, opens up the deeper issues, uncovers the confusions of the heart. ‘Do you want to be made well?’

There’s a huge cost to pay if you’re going to change.

Isn’t there just!

And that’s where we enter the story. Do ***we*** want to be changed? As Christians we’re pretty well bound to be committed to change because we know we’re not as we could be in Christ, we’re far from perfect, and the world is not as it should be in terms of the Kingdom.

WH Auden wrote: ‘We would rather be ruined than changed. We would rather die in our dread than climb the cross of the moment and let our illusions die.’ By the stage of life most of us have reached, we’re pretty well used to the shape of life that we’ve got and the kind of people we are.

There’s rumoured to be a road-sign in the Australian outback that says, ‘Choose your rut carefully; you’ll be in it for the next 40 miles.’ So with out lives. We become the kind of people we are, not as good as we’d like, not as bad as we’d feared. We do the kind of things we do, not as exciting or world-changing as we intended when we were young, but we rub along. We might even think we’re pretty well adjusted to life as it is.

But the playwright Tennessee Williams once said, ‘I’m not sure that I would want to be well-adjusted to things as they are. I’d prefer to be racked by desire for things [to be] better than they are, even for things that are unattainable, than to be satisfied with things as they are.’

I asked two people recently how they would rate their lives now, out of 10. They both said 6. What would make it 7, I asked. Oh, this and that, they said. I’d wanted to ask what would make it 9, but it felt as if that was too far off.

Do you want to be made well? Do you want to change?

The trouble is, problems and attitudes are hard to shift when you get past your early 20s. Old habits get baked in. Hidden prejudices, addictions. But as CS Lewis said, ‘You can’t go back and change the beginning, but you can start where you are and change the ending.’

Do you want to be made well?

As with all sermons you preach first to yourself. Do I want to be made well, to change? Because I could. With the help of the in-dwelling Christ, I could. Some of the selfishness, the self-absorption, some of the trust in that terrible trio of possessions, popularity and power. I could change them – with the love of Christ.

Jesus said to the man, ‘Stand up, take your bed, and walk.’ And he did. After 38 years. He got up and walked away. Stiffly, I imagine! The love of Christ is powerful. It changes people. Like nothing else I know.

When Sentamu was Archbishop of York he once spent a week fasting, praying and sleeping in a little purple tent he pitched inside York Minster to bring him closer to people and their needs. At the beginning of the week a dishevelled man came up and said he’d never been in a church before but he needed to talk. His marriage had ended and he’d turned to drink. Sentamu told him to look around at the stunningly beautiful minster and imagine how he would feel if people began to fill it with rubbish. He said to the man, you’re feeling that your life is rubbish, but you’re much more beautiful than the minster. They hugged, and the man talked a bit more with one of the minster staff, and then left. At the end of the week the man came back, smartly dressed and all cleaned up. And he told Sentamu that he was going back to work.

The love of Christ is powerful - if we want to be healed.

Perhaps we could think about that, where in our lives would we like to change, to be healed? If we do.

Of course, if we want to change *the world* that takes a little longer. As the greeting card says, ‘I tried to change the world, but I couldn’t get a babysitter.’ Changing the big stuff is a massive task, as we always find with violence and war (think Ukraine), or poverty and hunger (think Yemen, Afghanistan, Somalia), or inequality (think this country, and everywhere).

But if we look for what the epistle talked of today, a new heaven and a new earth, we can’t be surprised if there are some ‘alterations’ to be made along the way. There’s a lot to do if the world is to be healed. One theologian said, ‘The Kingdom of God is a healed creation.’

And one way of seeing this miracle at the Pool of Bethesda, and all these events in John’s gospel that he calls ‘signs,’ is that they’re foretastes of this new, healed creation, this new world, that constitutes God’s ultimate goal for his old creation.

But change starts nearer home, with us and our openness to God’s good work in us. And here at least there’s some good news. John Newton the ex-slave-trader said, ‘I am not what I ought to be; I am not what I want to be; I am not what I hope to be; but by the grace of God I am not what I was.’ We can change; by the grace of God we **have** changed.

God grant me the serenity to accept what I can’t change – that is, other people. But God grant me the courage to change what I can – that is, myself. In the power of the Spirit.

So, Jesus asks us all, ‘Do you want to be healed?’ (photo 4)