

Healing at the Pool

Sermon message by the Rev Derek Lightbourne at St James and All Saints May 26th 2019

Keynote Bible passage: John 5.1 – 17

As the season of Easter draws to a close, the work of the risen Christ continues. Today we are taken back to a significant action of the ministry of Jesus. Furthermore, there's aspects we can learn from the story of Jesus coming to the Pool and asking a man with a disability, 'Do you want to be made well?'

1) *What's in a name?* First though we need note something that's changed in recent years. Perhaps it comes under political correctness. This man is variously described in older bible translations as a paralytic or a cripple, or handicapped or an invalid. Thankfully we don't use such names in these days, with more respect for the *person* with a disability. There were others with disabilities also at the pool hoping for a healing miracle in their lives. Bearing this in mind it is so easy to designate a person by their disability - and the bible translations do this, a leper, a demoniac, a cripple..... How might these people feel about being labelled in such a way? Such rather determines their life, and in Jewish custom very often they were also marginalised in society. Indeed, it was interesting to note when I did a study for a thesis how this impacted in healing. What I discovered was that the majority of those who received Jesus healing of a physical need were also restored into society or the community. Think for example of the Samaritan woman at the well welcomed back to her village community after the encounter with Jesus. Or those with leprosy back into society after approval by the priests.

It's a warning for us too. People with disabilities can easily be marginalised in these days. Take mental health for example. Also, I have a caution about reference to 'the last the lost and the least.' How do such in those categories feel about that being their lot?

They are people, like us.

2) *'Do you want to be made well?'*

Back to the gospel, we hear about Jesus approaching this man lying by the pool of Bethesda, just outside Jerusalem. John tells us he'd been there 38 years, which could explain part of the story. He would have needed friends to bring him food, and to get him into the pool when the expected healing might happen. So, he had waited and waited. Jesus asked a question, translated, *'Do you want to be made well?'* That question would imply physical healing.

Yet there's more healing on offer. How do we know? 'The King James version is more accurate a translation of the Greek. *Will thou be made whole?* Answering the question that way would account for the second part of the story, we'll come to this. But before that, the man doesn't directly answer Jesus, rather he explains his inability to get into the pool quickly enough. More occurs after the man gets a physical cure, picking up his mat and being able to walk.

3) *Sabbath rules.* There's an underlying issue – for the Jewish officials. Jesus' act of compassion was on a Sabbath, and the man is challenged about breaking one of the laws. He doesn't know how to answer and it turns out he didn't know who Jesus was and anyway Jesus had moved on and was amongst the crowd gathered.

4) *Fulness of healing.* Then the sequel to the story occurs. Jesus meets the man again and says to him 'See you have been made well. Do not sin any more, or something worse may befall you.' My understanding of this is also healing context. It is likely the man had been quite resentful and bitter about being stuck at the pool 38 years and still waiting. It is likely his friends had long gone. So, Jesus' counsel towards the fullness of healing was attending to the man's bitterness and resentment.

5) Then a final aspect to the story, of Jesus' ongoing ministry. After being challenged about healing on the Sabbath Jesus responds, '*My Father is working and I also am working.*'

For us: As mentioned at the beginning of the sermon there's important aspects we can learn from this encounter.

1) First, and there's no need to go into further detail, of how we regard people and mindful *they are folk like us* and not to label by a disability.

2) '*Wilt thou be made whole?*' The reality of human life is that we are prone to illness and may be affected by a disability. Thankfully we have modern medicine and technology to aid us. As the doctor said to me, 'you will need to take these for the rest of your life.' Yet I've learned it's the *inner wellbeing* that counts for much. When a person asks 'Are you well?' Instead of it being a question to one's physical being, it's an inner question to my heart, mind and soul. Wellness or wholeness, and that's what Jesus was responding to when he saw the man physically well but still likely with bitterness in his language. For me that wholeness is about relationship with Jesus continuing, and growing in closeness, in Presence. I liken wholeness to being a journey, the journey of life.

3) The *ministry of prayer and compassion, anytime, anywhere*. Most often the gospel stories of healing are about people who came to Jesus with their need, or for a family member. And today this is surely appropriate as we pray for healing for a loved one. This morning's gospel story is where Jesus approaches the man to minister to him. That would suggest there's times and places where healing happens irrespective, as Jesus knows our need. One such place can be in Holy Communion, where Jesus meets us and we are able to cope more effectively with our need. I note in this context St Paul's prayer offered to the Philippians, 'In all your prayers ask God for what you need, always asking with thankful heart.' (4.6) My understanding of this is that irrespective of our present concern there's so much to be thankful for, and we need to look beyond the present. The effect is on our mind and spirit being in a better place. There may be also 'meetings' when we are in conversation with another that their needs are shared and we can pray for them silently or shared.

4) The second part of the gospel story is a reminder of how one's attitudes can affect relationships. We might not think of a place for *healing of attitudes*. Attitudes are a facet of the mind. This is part of the brain's functioning. From our attitudes we form thoughts and words and actions. A simple aspect of this is positivity and negativity. One can find oneself engaging in negative self-talk. This may lead to low self-esteem. How much more preferable is positive self-talk leading to forgiveness and healing and indeed wholeness.

5) *A word of encouragement* '*my Father is working and I am working still.*' At the heart of healing and wholeness is the truth: 'Jesus is the same yesterday today and forever.' Hence the encouragement from today's gospel story. Jesus ministry is timeless then and now, and hence he comes to us and we can come to him. '*Wilt thou be made whole?*'