



Praise, Prayer & Preaching sermon

A good thing – a great offence

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John 5:1-15

This evening we turn our attention to John 5. In the extended passage, to verse 18, John presents us with all the conventions of a classic healing/miracle form. There are great similarities with what we read in the Synoptic Gospels.

However, we know that John is more selective and gathers his gospel around a much smaller number of signs and extended teaching than in the Synoptics.

What can this passage say to us? – and what does it mean for us? To answer these questions:-

- We must pay close attention to the content of the passage
- We may find much to help us understand the wider ministry of Jesus and the growing sense of conflict that emerges
- We will encounter two very different thoughts: one is the goodness of Jesus' actions; and the other is the offence that these actions appear to bring to the religious leaders of the day

In this fascinating context in John, we are told of an incident which is clearly good, in that a man is healed – but, at the same time, the complex web of opposition to the ministry of Jesus begins to unfold. Chiefly because the man was carrying his mat on the Sabbath, this incident sparks increasing tension with the Jewish leaders.

As we look at the incident, we will gain much in doing so, but must keep in mind the wider issue of what is actually happening in relation to the ministry of Jesus.

The Pool of Bethesda is situated just north of the Temple Mount. It is a well-excavated site and I have always found pilgrims to Jerusalem are intrigued by what they see there. Entry is by a small wall near a gate to the city and then an expansive area presents itself.

In New Testament times, it was considered to be a place of healing and, because this occurrence takes place at a Jewish festival (v.1), it is not surprising that a large crowd had gathered. The festival is not named, but three Jewish feasts were obligatory for Jewish males – Passover, Pentecost and Tabernacles. Some writers spend a good deal of time exploring this matter and the order in John's Gospel, but I don't think it should concern us unduly this evening.

It is worth keeping in mind that the area is situated much lower than the rest of the city. We can construct an understanding of what happened in terms of a pool that would bubble up periodically. If the pool lies below street level, which it does, this helps us to grasp why this might occur.



Some later manuscripts explain people's understanding regarding the movement of the water, but this does not mean that the gospel writer – or Jesus – commend that understanding.

The colonnades were crowded with people suffering from a wide variety of illnesses. The fact that there were colonnades and arches meant people could shelter in poor weather. It was a place where those with physical maladies would gather in the hope of being healed. They were eager for the special moment of healing, after the stirring of the waters.

This was not a shallow pool, but a significant gathering of water. It might be worth considering the thought of thermal springs and the fact that the pool was deep would make it a recipient of water from other sources. There are similar springs which are thought to have healing properties, such as Lourdes in France, or Guadeloupe in the southern Caribbean Sea, but the point of this incident is far more meaningful than its location.

John doesn't name the feast, nor does he name the man who was healed – and so we need to look deeper if we are to discover what may help us in this significant passage in John.

Curiously, there is no mention of any of Jesus' disciples being with him, though that is not to suggest they weren't there, but I think it is worthy of note.

Twentieth century American playwright and novelist, Thornton Wilder, wrote a short play entitled *The Angel That Troubled the Water*, which reflected some of the ancient ideas regarding the fact that the first person who succeeded in scrambling into the water would be cured. In his play, the invalid cries out, "I shall sit here without ever lifting my eyes from the surface of the pool. I shall be next. Many times ever since I have been here, many times the angel has passed and stirred the water, and hundreds have left the hall leaping and crying for joy. I shall be the next. But it was not to be."

It is not difficult to imagine how difficult it was for people who sought healing, but never found it. I have met the same pain in many people in our contemporary world, who are reaching out for the healing of God but struggle to find it in themselves.

Let us hold before us the question of Jesus:

"Do you want to get well?" (John 5:6)

We consider this man's illness as symbolic of all those experiences that may occur in our lives, which can leave us feeling that there is nowhere to turn.

Norman Nees tells the story of an Arizonian cowboy who is riding down a trail. Suddenly he turns a corner and sees a Native American lying in the middle of the trail. He has his ear pressed close to the ground. As he got closer, the Native American began to speak, "Wagon," he said, "drawn by two horses. Horses both dapple grey. Passengers in wagon. Two passengers. One man, one woman. Man driving."

The cowboy was amazed. He could hardly believe it. "That's incredible, I can't believe it! You can tell us all that just by listening with your ear to the ground?"

And the Indian replied, "No, they ran over me half an hour ago!"



Most of us have moments in our lives when we feel flattened. Something may come along that makes us feel there is no way out. Something devastating happens: a relationship that is precious may break down; we may experience loss in its many forms, and we are left staggering and wondering where to turn.

The person who features in the early part of John 5 had been permanently flattened, it would seem. He was there among a great crowd of people – for thirty-eight years, we are told! Some writers want to allegorise the passage and suggest the 38 represents the years the Children of Israel wandered in the desert. But I want to focus on the plain fact that here on his pallet the man was in desperate need of healing. It is made worse by the fact that he didn't have friends to help him.

JESUS' QUESTION IS OBVIOUS – AND IT RAISES THE MATTER OF THE WILL OF THIS PERSON

The first thing that Jesus does in this account is to challenge this person's will. We are told it is when Jesus saw him lying there and learned of his condition, perhaps by asking someone nearby, he asked the question, *"Do you want to get well?"*

Obviously the man wanted to get well, you may say. It is like the obvious question we might ask people:-

- A friend turns up at work with an eye patch and we say, "Is something wrong with your eye?"
- We see our neighbour's legs emerging from under his car and we say, "Is there something wrong with the car?" As if he was going to say, "No, I've just come under the car for a rest!"
- We meet our friend waiting at the bus stop with a suitcase and we ask, "Are going somewhere?" He might say, "No, I just like to carry a suitcase around with me!"

The enquiry of Jesus is really a question of will. Our will is very important and so much a part of our healing and our living. It is in our will that we understand the capacity we have to say yes or no in any given situation.

The question of Jesus goes to the core of who we are; it questions what the nature of our decisions might be and encourages the exercise of our will.

This person appears to have been waiting for healing for such a long time. The long years represent disappointment and perhaps even hopelessness. So it is not surprising that Jesus addresses the essential part of his life, which is his will.

So much of both our healing and living depends upon our will. Healing and wholeness are very closely related. I think of this in terms of the spiritual, the emotional, the physical and the relational. The question of real wholeness is always "Do you want to get well?" It is not the only question, but it is such an important one.



The man was only able to think in the space which related to the water being agitated and Jesus wants to explore with him a much deeper aspect of healing.

Henri Nouwen, in *Reaching Out*, touched on a very important aspect when he wrote, “Those who do not run from our pains but touch them with compassion bring healing and new strength. The paradox is that the beginning of healing is in the solidarity with pain.”

I find this helpful. In addition to noticing the man, the fact that Jesus takes the initiative speaks of his healing compassion.

THE BARRIERS TO WHOLENESS – AND THIS RAISES THE MATTER OF SELF-PITY

As with so many of these New Testament stories, we can fill in the dots and get the wrong solution. We don't know why he had not been healed. We are given one possible answer – he didn't have friends to help him into the water. But I think we should be careful we don't come to the wrong conclusion.

Another option, hard as it is to name, might be:– Had the man become comfortable with being sick?

- Had self-pity become a source of comfort?
- Had self-pity become destructive?
- Had he become a victim in his own mind?

If we bathe in the mud of self-pity, we can remain bound and unable to find any measure of healing.

There are, of course, other barriers and I name a small number:-

- A cynical spirit that prevents us receiving help
- A destructive temperament that keeps us from healing
- A blatant unwillingness to acknowledge the real source of our healing

There is no healing that we can seek without reaching out in faith. There are instances in the gospels when the faith of others is so important, but faith is always a critical factor.

I think it is worth considering the fact that Jesus gravitated to this man in the crowd. This tells us a great deal about Jesus, for he was always reaching out to those in need. The man had been at the pool longer than Jesus had lived, yet he is still there, representing a lifetime of disappointment.

James Boswell, the famous biographer of Dr Samuel Johnson, a great man of letters, expressed surprise that the great Dr Johnson had taken under his wing a man with a very bad reputation. He asked his friend Oliver Goldsmith what he thought of it – and Goldsmith replied, “He is poor and honest, which is recommendation enough for Johnson. He has now become miserable and that ensures the protection of Johnson.”



The fact that Johnson's friend was friendless was evidence enough that he needed his care.

You could ask why Jesus didn't heal everyone at the pool. And that takes us to the deeper question of the purpose of the ministry of Jesus.

Jesus didn't wait around after this healing to take credit for what had happened. But the incident would have further implications.

Each day, as I meet with many different people, I am conscious that our world is filled with those who have regrets. Perhaps they say, "I could have – or I should have – or I would have." These become the bitterest phrases of all. The trap for many people is letting past 'coulds, woulds and shoulds' so overwhelm us that it becomes impossible to look forward and articulate the 'cans, wills and shalls'.

From another perspective, Søren Kierkegaard observed that most people "are subjective towards themselves and objective towards all others, terribly objective sometimes." In exploring this tenderness with ourselves and toughness towards others, he further writes, "But the real task is in the fact to be objective towards oneself – and subjective towards all others."

A church noticeboard once had written upon it, "Make peace with one's neighbours; make quarrels with one's faults."

THE GIFT OF WHOLENESS – WHICH SPEAKS OF THE TOTALITY OF HEALING

Let us remind ourselves of the pattern of the incident:-

- Jesus asked this person if he wanted to be made whole and, in doing so, stirred up his will
- Secondly, he called on the man's faith, "*Pick up your mat and walk.*" (v.11)
- Jesus slipped away into the crowd. (v.13)

We have to be very careful when we talk about the theme of healing, because we can stir up unhelpful expectations that Jesus will bring physical healing in each and every situation.

Having said that, we can be certain that Jesus brings wholeness into people's lives – and we can know wholeness even when we are limited in some particular aspect of our lives.

Some of the people who have demonstrated to me what wholeness means have been those who were themselves damaged in some way, bruised by life's journey, and those who had experienced real loss.

There is a difficult part to this passage, which I must not ignore – and that is that Jesus found the man in the temple and we read the strong words, "*See you are well again. Stop sinning or something worse may happen to you.*" (v.14)

One night, while conducting an evangelistic meeting in a Salvation Army Citadel in Chicago, Booth Tucker preached on the theme of the Sympathy of Jesus. After the meeting, a man



came to him and said, "If your wife had just died, like mine has, you wouldn't be saying what you are."

Tragically a few days later, Tucker's wife was killed in a train accident. Her body was brought to Chicago and carried into the same citadel for the funeral. After the service, the bereaved preacher turned to those attending and said, "The other day a man told me that I wouldn't speak of the sympathy of Jesus if my wife had just died. If that man is here, I want to tell him that Christ is sufficient. My heart is broken, but it has a song put there by Jesus. I want that man to know that Jesus Christ speaks comfort to me today."