

Sermon for Easter 6, Yr C

THE TEXT: JOHN 5:1-9

After these things, Jesus went up to Jerusalem for a feast of the Jews. Now there is in Jerusalem near the sheep-gate a pool which in Hebrew is called 'Bethesda', and which has five colonnades. Here there were lying a crowd of the weak, infirm, sick, needy and distressed, blind, crippled, and lame. One man who was there had been infirm for thirty-eight years. When Jesus saw him lying there, and knowing that he had already been there for a long time, He said to him: "Do you want to be well?" The invalid answered Him: "Sir, I do not have anyone to help me into the pool when the water has been stirred—while I am trying another one goes down before me. Jesus said to him: "Rise, take up your mat, and walk." And immediately the man was cured, and he took his mat and was walking about. And the day on which this happened was a Sabbath.

We live in a world which has seemingly now more than ever become obsessed with that search for extending human life for the sake of happiness. In his book *The Sacred Romance*, John Eldridge says: "If for all practical purposes we believe that this life is our best shot at happiness, if this is as good as it gets, we will live as desperate, demanding, and eventually despairing men and women. We will place on this world a burden that it was never intended to bear. We will try to find a way to get back into the Garden and when that fails, as it always does, our hearts will fail as well."

This search for a long and healthy life, as the basis for human happiness, is seen through the unprecedented scientific formulation of our food—high in omega 3, low in GI, and includes all manner of vitamin supplements. Then there's the numerous spiritualities all aimed at creating 'inner health'. There are websites called 'Top ten tips on how to live longer', which assert that cold showers, exercise routines, having long-living parents, and brain stimulation through activities like knitting, will boost longevity. One website even claims that the hot springs in the Greek island of Lesvos have a therapeutic quality, and bathing in these waters will cure conditions from arthritis to skin diseases, and guarantee a longer life. Bath houses from the most ancient times still remain and are used there today.

Our Gospel reading for today mentions a similar bath house, thought to also have healing properties. In the North-Eastern corner of Jerusalem, near the sheep gate, John tells us that there was a pool called Bethesda, which means 'House of mercy'. The ruins of the pool can still be seen today, particularly the steps where people used to walk down to wade in the water. The people of the day believed that this pool had healing properties, thought to be caused by an angel who stirred up the waters (presumably a perception as to what was causing the spring to bubble). When this

happened, it was believed that the first person to get in to the water would be healed from whatever ailment they had.

Our text says that there was a whole crowd that used to gather there: the weak, the sick, invalids, needy, distressed, blind, crippled and lame. The mental picture we get is of the world's worst hospital waiting room, overcrowded with patients desperately clinging to this hope of being healed by this healing water.

Our person in particular is singled out: a man who had been there for a long time and who had been crippled for thirty eight years. Thirty eight years! Imagine his longing, his sense of desperation, the incredible suffering and severe limitation that his condition imposed upon his life. Imagine the man's sense of despair: how can he get in? He's crippled. His lament is that he doesn't have anyone else to help him into the water. Many other fellow-sufferers there are also crippled, or blind. How can they safely lead him in? If any of the others lead him down the steps, they will be the first one into the water anyway, and so they will be the ones healed.

Then Jesus comes and asks the man: "Do you want to get well?" What a bizarre question from Jesus. Of course the man wants to be healed, doesn't he? Why else is he there? So our text throws a number of questions up to us. And the first one is: "Why does Jesus ask this?" Is it so the man can respond in faith? No—because when Jesus asks him, the man doesn't even say: "yes please!" This is his big chance. But his only answer is to repeat his sad condition: "Sir, I do not have anyone to help me into the pool when the water has been stirred—while I am trying another one goes down before me." His faith isn't in Jesus—it's in the waters of the pool. And the man doesn't even recognise who Jesus is. After our text, in v11 he tells the Jews: "*The man who made me well...*"

In fact, there's no room for faith at all in our text. Jesus simply heals the man with his powerful word that does what it says it will do: "Take up your mat and walk." Jesus' word causes the man to do just that! The cripple for 38 years gets up and walks around! It's a clear instance of a gracious miracle. There is no evidence of faith before Jesus works it, and it's only much later, in v15 that the man recognises that it was Jesus who worked the miracle.

Then we're led to ask another question: why does Jesus only heal this man, and not all of those at the 'house of mercy'? When we ask that question, it leads us to ask another: why doesn't Jesus heal us, or those we love, when, unlike this man, we do show faith in Jesus and ask him for it? Why does he let some of us suffer and struggle?

Our text doesn't offer us an answer to that question, and, in fact, nowhere in the Bible is there an answer.

But today's text *does* give us an answer to *another* question.

Our text today is one of the clearest presentations of the broken human condition. Suffering, ailments, paralysis, blindness. People, like the man who was healed, barely existing. The original Greek word used for these invalids in our text also describes a spiritual reality: the reality that apart from Jesus, the human race is spiritually crippled, paralysed, weak and sick. It's what we call original sin. And

suffering and frailty is somewhere between original sin in our lives that we inherited from Adam, and the wages of that sin, death.

So when we ask the other question, which is: "What has Jesus done to overcome my spiritual paralysis, my spiritual sickness of sin, which separates me from God" our text gives us an answer. It is in Jesus, the Lord of Life. By this miracle, Jesus shows that He is the Christ, the One appointed by God to be the Saviour of the world. In Christ, the fullness of God's power and authority over all creation and even the powers of darkness and death is shown. No diet or exercise routine or therapeutic waters compare to Christ. This miraculous healing that he performs is a foretaste of the glorious resurrection which all those who trust in him will share in when he returns.

This miracle points ahead to the Cross, where Jesus once for all ruled over the powers of chaos: sin, death and the devil. On the Cross, Jesus took upon himself the pain and suffering of the whole world. He embraced the brokenness of all creation with his outstretched arms on the Cross. He didn't just do that so that he could sympathise with you...as if we could say: what a relief, Jesus knows how we feel. NO! Jesus actually did something about it! He took upon Himself our sin and our brokenness, even our infirmities, Isaiah says in chapter 53, so that by his stripes, we are healed. He changed places with you, for you, to take upon himself your sin, and the consequences of original sin in your life, in which all creation shares in and groans as it awaits deliverance, Paul says in Romans 8. Christ doesn't just offer a time extension on our life or a better quality of life. He offers us fullness of life. Eternal life. By his death, Christ put to death sin and death itself, so that your Heavenly Father declares you to be fully forgiven and in a right standing with himself. You also share in Jesus' own rising to life, so that you may also rise to new life with him daily.

How do you actually receive this? Not through the pool of mercy, but the mercy in the pool: holy baptism.

In your baptism, God declared you to be fully forgiven and in a right relationship with him because of the suffering and death of his Son. In your baptism Jesus himself united you to his death so that the old life lived in sin died, with all its consequences of sickness, suffering and death—and eternal separation from God. And Jesus united you to his resurrection, so that you receive eternal life and may daily rise to new life with him.

Just like the man who could not take himself down the steps to the so-called healing waters, we cannot take ourselves to the font. We also needed outside help. Even if we made a decision to do so, that faith is first worked in us. Out of his mercy, the Holy Spirit calls us through the Gospel, enlightens us with his gifts, and makes us holy and keeps us in the one true faith, as Luther explained in his Small Catechism. Until the Spirit works this faith in us, we share in the same life as those who are spiritually lame, crippled, and blind. And just like the man who was healed and then received faith, Christ first healed you and then gave you faith in him, in your baptism. In this faith you are justified so that you should not stumble in sin but stand in confidence and joy before the Father as his dearly beloved children and holy and precious saints.

Until the day he will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, Jesus continually forgives you, and continually makes you whole, through his precious body and blood, which we eat and drink in Holy Communion. This is your forgiveness, your strength, your medicine for body and soul, Luther said, to live the daily life of a baptised person, daily dying to sin and rising to new life in Christ. Jesus doesn't say to you: "Take up your mat and walk", but "Take and eat, this is my body given for you, take and drink, this is my blood which is shed for you for the forgiveness of sins." When you eat and drink, God again proclaims the forgiveness of your sins to you, and you receive Jesus' own holiness from the inside out, to purify your hearts and sprinkle your consciences clean with the blood that is a better blood than the Old Testament sacrifices of bulls and goats and lambs. Indeed he is the true Passover lamb--your Passover Lamb, through whom God *passes over* in judgement, and instead declares you to be fully forgiven, innocent, and righteous. On the last day when Jesus returns, just as he said to the crippled man in our text he will also say to you: "Rise up!" and he will take you to be in his presence forever, to share in his glory and the unending heavenly joy beyond comprehension. Amen.