

The healing at the pool by Rev John Castle

A sermon given on Sunday 25th May 2025 at St Michael's Church, Sandhurst

Reading: John 5:1-18

(Lectionary for 6th Sunday of Easter, Year C)

Introduction: a turn-up for the books

I wonder whether you have ever been pleasantly surprised by a happy turn of events? Perhaps you or someone you know had been on a long waiting list for an operation and suddenly there's a cancellation and you're offered a date?

Or you've been praying for someone for a long time, and suddenly you hear that your prayers have been answered?

Today's gospel reading is about just such an event. A man who's been ill for thirty-eight years meets a stranger who instantly heals him. He doesn't even know who the stranger is. And he wasn't expecting to be healed.

There are several strange features about this story:

The miraculous pool

Firstly, the miraculous pool - or was it? From our text, it seems that the pool of Bethesda in Jerusalem (which you can visit today) was believed to have healing properties. It was believed that from time to time the water was stirred, and the first person to get into the pool would be healed. There is an explanation in verse 4, that an angel would stir the waters. This verse is not in the earliest manuscripts, so it is

relegated to a footnote in most modern translations. Scholars think it was added later to explain what people in the story believed.

In any case this was not a very reliable way to get healed - it only happened occasionally, and then it was every man for himself¹, so the less able-bodied, who most needed healing, missed out. But in the absence of a public health service, some people were so desperate that they thought it worth their while to camp out by this pool, on the off-chance that they might be healed.

This was the situation for the man who Jesus spoke to at the pool that day.

The strange question

The second strange feature that I noticed in this story was Jesus' question (v6) "Do you want to get well?" It reminds me of Jesus' question to Bartimaeus, the blind beggar in Jericho who heard that Jesus was passing by and shouted out for help. Jesus asks him "What do you want me to do for you?" It was obvious that the man was blind. But Jesus wants him to say it himself.²

The man's response to Jesus' question, "Do you want to get well?" reveals the man's state of mind. Let's imagine something of his story. We're not told what was wrong with him, but in his youth (38 years ago) he had become disabled. Then at some point he heard about the pool of Bethesda, and decided to take his chance at lying there, hoping for a

¹ John 5:7

² Mark 10:46-52

miracle cure. Many years later, he's still disabled. Lying by the pool each day has become a way of life. In theory, he still thinks he could be healed, but in reality has no friends to assist him to get into the pool if the water should be miraculously stirred. He has given up hope, and resigned himself to this lifestyle.

Can you imagine how *you* would feel about the possibility of being healed if you had put up with an illness for 38 years? How much faith would you have that you could be healed?

Maybe you have put up with a bad situation for many years. It could be an illness of your own, or of someone in your family, but it could be a difficult relationship, or a difficult situation in your workplace. Do you believe that anything could change, or have you resigned yourself to carrying on with the problem unchanged? We might also think of geopolitical situations – the Middle East problem, for example. And yet in my lifetime we've seen the Berlin Wall come down, apartheid dismantled in South Africa and the Good Friday Agreement in Northern Ireland.

No faith required

The third strange thing about this story is how the man was healed. In many of Jesus' healings, Jesus commends the sick person for his or her faith, for example the woman healed of the bleeding by touching Jesus' clothes. Jesus says to her "Your faith has made you well"³. But in today's story the man did not know who Jesus was⁴. So it clearly wasn't the

³ Mark 5:25-34

⁴ John 5:13

case that he knew about Jesus and had faith to be healed. And if you read carefully, you'll see that he was healed before he got up and took up his mattress⁵. Some miracles in the Gospels occur because of the faith of the sufferer, others because of the faith of friends, others simply because it is the will of Jesus to heal someone.

Just this man

Another feature of this story is that Jesus healed only one of the many sick people at the pool. Here Jesus seems to be anonymous - he is able to slip away into the crowd⁶. On other occasions in the other gospels we read that Jesus healed all who were brought to him. But here he singles out one. We cannot predict how God will act. There is no doubt that he has the power to do anything he pleases. He can answer any prayer, but then he may not answer a prayer, or may give a different answer to what we expected, and he is not obliged to give us an explanation of his decision.

But while Jesus heals only this one man at the pool, he doesn't leave it there. Later, Jesus finds the man in the Temple and gives him further advice:

“See, you have been made well. Do not sin any more, so that nothing worse happens to you”.⁷

We don't know what connection there might have been between the man's disability and any sin he may have committed. Perhaps he fell and crippled himself while trying

⁵ John 5:8-9

⁶ John 5:13

⁷ John 5:14

to burgle a house? The point here is that Jesus is concerned about how the man will cope with his new-found freedom. Jesus seems to be advising him to live in the light of the gratitude he feels for being healed.

Conclusion

This story doesn't give us a blueprint for healing, or a guaranteed way to get our prayers answered. But it does invite us to reflect on our lives and the situations around us in a new way.

Is there a situation you have put up with for a long time which you thought could never change? Have you lost hope?

What might God be saying to you about this situation?

If God were to answer your prayers, how would you use the opportunities that the new situation would offer you?

Do our lives reflect gratitude for the blessings God has already given us?