

Jesus meets a paralysed man at Bethesda

John 5:1-9

When someone who has been healed miraculously by prayer and the laying on of hands or who has laid hands on others with prayer for healing speaks about healing through prayer they are nearly always asked whether they are trying to say that God heals everyone.

On the one hand there is no record in the New Testament of any occasion where Jesus refused or failed to heal someone who asked him. On the other hand it is also true that he did not heal everyone.

Jesus came to Jerusalem as did many of his fellow Jews for a festival. While there he visited Bethesda Pool. This pool was beside the "Sheep Gate". This gate was built, or rebuilt, at the time of Nehemiah and is mentioned in Nehemiah 3:1 & 32 and 12:39. Jerusalem had other gates named after animals, such as the "Fish Gate" (Nehemiah 3:3) and the "Horse Gate" (Nehemiah 3:28). It is tempting to suppose that these were the sites of the Jerusalem sheep, fish and horse markets. Certainly Jerusalem would have had such markets, probably just outside the city walls. Bethesda could then have been the pool supplying water for the sheep awaiting sale. The Sheep Gate was near the temple, which would have been a sensible location for a sheep market, as sheep would be required for sacrifice in the temple. In Jesus' day of course there were sheep for sale inside the (expanded) temple area itself.

When he arrived at the Bethesda Pool he saw a crowd of sick people. Some of them were blind, some were crippled, some with limbs emaciated from paralysis. Others were sick with a great variety of other diseases. It was natural for them to gather together. In the outside world they would be despised. Their clothes were ragged, their bodies unclean, their hair unkempt. Not for them were the luxuries of an easy life. Not for them a steady income from trade in the capital city. Together they were amongst friends and fellow sufferers. No one but the visitors despised them there. It is the same in the market places and streets of the poor parts of the East today.

But there was something else, something special, that attracted them to Bethesda. From time to time the waters in the pool appeared to be unnaturally stirred. Tradition had it that the first person to enter the water after this stirring would be healed. Who knows? We should not automatically despise such stories as nonsense, but we are certainly not in a position to confirm this story either. Faith is something very strange, quite outside our understanding. It sometimes seems to have a power of its own almost independent of the object of that faith. Show us what faith is Lord.

So they came to the pool each morning, or perhaps some with nowhere better to sleep lived there permanently. The blind came with their sticks to ensure that they did not trip over anything. The crippled came in a variety of ways depending on where they were crippled. Some leaning on sticks dragging a lifeless limb behind them. Some shuffling along on hands and knees through the dusty streets with pads on their legs and arms where they touched the ground. What a sight. Arousing the compassion and prayers of the godly and humble. "O Lord, why and for how long must my fellow human being suffer like this? ... This could be me." Stirring in the best of mankind actual practical help. Yet arousing the scorn of others, some of whom felt they were too good to suffer like that. Disaster would not befall them.

It was a Saturday morning. Jesus appears to be out for a stroll. There is no mention of the disciples with him. The sick are lying on bedding. Perhaps they had all slept there overnight They would not have been allowed to carry their bedding there on a Sabbath. Jesus arrives at the scene. Perhaps it was his first visit to that part of the city. I am sure that Jesus would have wanted to know as much as he could about the city whose condemnation he was later to pronounce.

What attracted Jesus to that particular man we do not know. We know now that he had been there for thirty eight years. We might ask why he had stayed there for so long when the situation was so hopeless. Did he still have a flicker of hope that one day he would be the person to be healed as the water was stirred? Or was it just that this was the life he had become accustomed to? It is very difficult to change a pattern of life, even for the better.

One evening as I was driving from Cornwall to London I picked up a couple of hitch-hikers. They were young men about thirty years old who had been living rough for ten years. They had spent a week or so at St. Ives and were on their way to Dorchester. It was the only life they knew. It was a life of freedom from the modern rat-race. In London they would sleep in shop doorways. The hostels they said were frequented by older men who were often drunk and fought each other, so they stayed away from hostels. They appeared happy with their way of life. In some ways I almost wished I could join them! But I don't think I would have survived. I dropped them off in Honiton because there they knew of a dry archway in a cemetery where they could sleep the night and then continue with their journey in daylight.

But let us return to Jerusalem. From the crowd of sick people Jesus picked out one man. Did his heavenly father point that man out to him? Did his heavenly father say to him: "There is a man I want you to heal?" Or was there some indication or sign in the man's appearance that attracted Jesus' attention to him? Or was it really some combination of the two? Somehow too he knew that the man had been there for a long time.

I go for a run most weeks along the beach and across the dunes near my home and I am always on the look out for people to stop and speak to. One recent run I felt God was telling me to take an unusual route and sure enough along the way someone stopped me to talk. On another occasion there was another person I had seen many times over several years and there was something about his situation which led me to pray for him every time I saw him. I prayed that someone better equipped than I would meet him and help him. Then one day he was standing on the very path I had been forced to take by the high tide and the Lord said to me: "Now you must talk to him." I found a feeble excuse to stop and talk and was able to help him in his long standing distress. My experience is not peculiar. For me it is uncommon. There are others for whom it is a daily experience. I'm sure it was for Jesus. So in a way we really do not need to ask whether Jesus came to that man because of something he saw in him or because of a special word from God. Sometimes it is one, sometimes the other, and sometimes a combination of the two.

But Jesus was selective. He chose only one man to heal that day. One out of many who needed his help. If he came to a hospital ward today one must suppose that he might heal only one, or none or a few at most.

When I was a missionary in the Sudan I went to Juba in the Southern Sudan to run a summer training course for religious education teachers just after the end of the first civil war. While there I became ill with typhoid and travelled back to Khartoum where I was looked after by a missionary doctor's family. One day while I was lying in bed with typhoid the doctor's nine year old boy developed a very high temperature which she could not stop rising with drugs. It had already reached danger level and become life-threatening.

She came to me and told me what had happened. I started to pray. I asked Jesus to come and stand by the boy's bedside and heal him. I felt Jesus say to me that he would send an angel to heal the boy. I said no. I wanted Jesus to come himself. I believe he did so, and the boy quickly recovered. I remained ill for several weeks more until drugs and nature took their healing course.

Bethesda was an occasion on which Jesus took the initiative. In most cases of healing the sick person came to Jesus or others brought them. On this occasion it was different. Jesus took the initiative.

He went to the man: "Do you want to be healed?"

The man of course had no inkling of what Jesus had in mind. His thoughts turned naturally to the pool and the hope of healing there was in the pool. Was Jesus perhaps the man who would help him in at the appropriate moment? We then see too that the companionship of the sick at the pool had another competitive aspect to it. "Who would be first in the pool?" was in the minds of them all. One can easily imagine fights breaking out between them. Shouting and arguing. Pushing and shoving for the best position. Recriminations when no one got in because of the argument. Shouting when someone fell in at the wrong moment! The weakest, the most in need, would be the last. How would

we have reacted if we were a sick person among the sick at that pool? If we believed we should put others first there would be no point in being there!

As I write this chapter it is the week of the massive Turkish earthquake of 1999. Over ten thousand bodies have been found and over thirty thousand are reported missing. Food is still scarce in many places and television pictures show people fighting over the scarce supplies of food arriving for distribution. I cannot imagine how people feel. How would I react in that situation? Would I fight like the others, pushing back those weaker than myself to feed myself and my family? Or would I let myself and my family go hungry? I pray that I may never have to suffer such a test.

At Bethesda they fought for health. We must wonder how many if any were really healed at that pool and how much was just imagination.

But Jesus had something better for the man than the uncertainties of getting into the pool of water at the right moment: "Get up, pick up your bedding, and go on your way." Immediately the man was healed, he picked up his bedding and walked away.

But pathetic, ritualistic, legalistic religion was walking the streets of Jerusalem. Jesus had found it bad enough in Galilee in a place out of sight but not out of mind of the darkened and distorted minds of the religious establishment. But here he was under their very noses. He had told the man to carry his bedding on a Sabbath day within a hundred yards of the holy temple. He had defied their authority. Their pedigree was unchallengeable. Here in Jerusalem lived the priests, the human descendants of Aaron to whom the promise was given in the holy covenant that his descendants and they alone would be priests for ever. To challenge their authority was surely to challenge the authority of the covenant itself, to challenge the authority of its mediator, Moses, and to challenge the authority of the mighty God and Creator who gave it. In their minds Jesus had challenged that authority.

But we are not looking in this chapter at those decrepit and moribund specimens of humanity. Bringing sense into their lives cost Jesus his life. Oh yes. He loved them too and wanted them healed of their false religion, but that is another story. Here we are looking at the man who was healed.

So the religious leaders told the man: "It is a Sabbath day. It is illegal for you to carry your bed on a Sabbath day" (verse 10). When Jesus healed the man with the withered arm the dispute with the religious leaders related to healing on the Sabbath. Here the issue they raised was different. It related to carrying things on the Sabbath. There are several pages in the Mishnah discussing what may or may not be carried on the Sabbath. The rabbis disagreed over whether a man with a wooden leg could walk about with it on the Sabbath! Those who allowed wooden legs allowed cripples to wear knee-pads if they crawled along on their knees. Sandals could not be worn if they had nails in them. Normal women's ornaments, such as earrings, were apparently allowed and it is specifically stated that a girl with pierced ears but no earrings could wear threads passed through the pierced ears to prevent them closing. Though beds were not specifically mentioned it is clear that with concern over such minute things something as large as a bed would certainly be ruled out.

When challenged for carrying his bed, the man said that the person who had healed him had told him to carry it. Perhaps he was just passing the blame or perhaps he felt that a person who could heal him had the right to be obeyed. For the religious leaders the miracle Jesus had performed was of no interest or consequence! All they could think about was that he was carrying a bed on the Sabbath. Obsession with trivial matters of religious law is just as common in the church today as it was in Jerusalem in the first century. The religious leaders naturally wanted to identify the criminal who had encouraged the man to break the law, but Jesus had disappeared in the crowd.

In a church I once belonged to the vicar has proposed a motion at the church council meeting that only "canonical" services may be held. The motion was of course passed, with only me opposing it. The fact that people are turning away from antiquated services in which they sit passively in pews is irrelevant to such people. They would rather see the church die than reconsider their ways. The vicar even went on to say that the matter could not be discussed again.

The man then went into the temple. To thank God? Jesus too went into the temple and spoke to the man. He told him not to sin any more or something worse might happen to him. It appears the man did not appreciate this. He went away and told the religious leaders that it was Jesus who had healed him.

There are some detailed points worthy of note in this story:

Verse 1: John does not tell us which Jewish feast it was. Jews particularly went to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover and the Feast of Tabernacles.

Verse 2: The exact name of the pool is somewhat uncertain but it was something like “Bethesda”. The problem we face is that the early manuscripts give different spellings. This is easily explained. It is in fact a problem I face daily in my translation work. Imagine a hand-written document with the words “a school teacher” in it. If the second “o” is not clear, or it looks like an “e”, your knowledge of the language tells you that it must be an “o”. But supposing you are faced with a foreign name you do not know, like “Dongola” and the “g” looks a bit like a “y”, you may make a mistake and think the place name is “Donyola”. If you are a scribe copying the document, you would pass on an erroneous spelling. The ancient scribes did not have comprehensive atlases and reference books to check with! A bible dictionary or commentary will give the details of variant spellings.

Verse 4: It is generally agreed that verse four has been added at some stage to some of the old copies of the New Testament. It is missing from some of the earliest and most modern translations leave it out or put it in the margin.

Verse 5: I would assume that the length of time the man had been there was either learnt by Jesus talking to the man or was learnt by later enquiry.

Verse 10: Carrying things on the Sabbath: See the Mishnah Shabbath 5:1 - 6:10. The wooden leg is discussed in Shabbath 6:8.

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