

26th February 2023, 1st Sunday of Lent, 'Let your light shine' – John 5:1-13 'Change'

I wonder if any of you have ever been to Lourdes – the grotto in France, that is, not the cricket ground. It's a world-famous place, with about 6 million pilgrims each year – but it divides opinion. It first rose to prominence in 1858, when a peasant girl called Bernadette had visions of a 'beautiful young lady' in a particular cave. People immediately attributed these to a vision of the Virgin Mary, and began to visit to see for themselves. Then there were testimonies of healings and other miracles among those pilgrims, and ever since, people have gone, hoping for the same. I wonder what you think of all this: some of you will be convinced, others of you will be sceptical.

Either way, today we meet the New Testament equivalent: the pool of Bethesda in Jerusalem. The waters were said to have healing powers, which meant that it had become effectively a permanent home for many with disabilities, who came every day, hoping to be healed.

Into this place comes Jesus: verse 1 says he was there for a festival – we're not sure which, but most likely it was the Festival of Purim, which celebrates the rescue of the Israelites in the time of Esther, from the baddie Haman. It's a story of deliverance – and on the face of it, this is another straightforward story of deliverance. Jesus meets a paralysed man and heals him, and then gets into trouble with Pharisees. But there's a bit more to story than that, which we'll unpack in the next few minutes today.

I want to pick up on 3 phrases in the conversation, firstly: **(v6) 'Do you want to get well?'**

That's quite an obvious question to ask, on the face of it. Of course he does, he's been here for 38 years! Why does Jesus even ask it? (As an aside, let's observe that 38 years is significant – it's the length of time the Jewish people wandered in the desert – we always say 40 years, but remember there's time at the beginning and the end when they're not travelling. The travelling time is 38 years – in other words, John is hinting here that Jesus is the Messiah, come to restore Israel after their spiritual wanderings – this is their promised land moment! Will they receive it? But back to the question – why does Jesus ask this man?)

It might be that he's been looking in the wrong place - holy water is, after all, a bit speculative. Why not ask God himself directly? But I think there's a deeper question here. **Change is painful for many of us.** Even when faced with real challenges, there is a sense of security in staying as we are – it's our identity and we can't imagine life any other way. So maybe it is a valid question after all?

And it's one Jesus always poses us in the season of Lent – do you want to be different? It may not be a permanent condition such as the man had, but many of us carry things that we wished were different about ourselves – will we let Christ transform us from the inside out? **(Take a moment)**

Second phrase v7 'I have no-one to help me' – so we have the answer to the first question: the implication is that man *did* want to get well – but there's a practical problem: he can't get down to the water quick enough, at the moment the water is thought to have healing properties. Someone else gets in first and gets the blessing. And he misses out, again and again, for 38 years.

Just take a moment to absorb this: after 38 years of missing out day after day, he's still there! Perhaps that habit, perhaps it's desperation (there's nowhere else), or perhaps it's extraordinary faith – maybe a bit of all three. Either way, he's stuck: he can't leave, and at the moment he can't change. And so he cries out to Jesus 'I have no-one to help me.'

This passage feels very apt today, because it's the great cry of our society, isn't it? So many people feel on their own. Who can help? And yes, there are so many practical things we can do: but the passage points us a very particular direction, or rather to a particular person. What the man wanted was someone to carry him to the water: but Jesus didn't carry him to water; he didn't need to. The man thought the water was a source of healing – but he discovered, wonderfully, that Jesus is the source of healing. His helping hand came through the transforming love and power of the Saviour.

And that challenges me – **how much do I see Jesus as the help that I need, as well as the people around me?** I'm not saying that practical help isn't important – but in the practical help that we offer, let's never forget that people need more than just practical assistance. We need a Saviour, we need to plug into the source of life itself.

And this passage reminds us that Jesus is interested in all of our lives. Praise the Lord that he doesn't invite us just to join a club! He invites us to a transformed life. All of our life matters to him. May this season renew our sense that every part of our lives can be touched by Jesus.

Thirdly, and finally, v12 'Who is this man?' – the people in the story didn't really know. The Pharisees were offended because this rabbi had broken one of their rules – and note that carrying a mat is a human interpretation of working on the Sabbath, not a scriptural one. The healed man didn't know, either: as our passage finishes – 'he had no idea who it was'.

Who is this man? It is the pre-eminent question of all history – who is Jesus? And today, as in the story, people aren't sure. Maybe you feel a bit like the man: Jesus has met you, but somehow you feel Jesus has slipped away again into the crowd, a bit too soon. If that's you, then may this season of Lent be your opportunity to go looking for Jesus again. Jesus is always found by those who seek him.

In Walton we're offering daily readings and weekly groups to assist in this process. If you're watching from further afield, take the chance to find ways you can do that, too. Either way, let's use this season to be renewed in our journey with Jesus, and towards Jesus.

Will you seek Jesus? Will you invite Jesus to be the help that you need? And will you let Jesus change you? May God grant us all grace to be bold, and to know the power of Christ in lives afresh. Amen.