

JESUS AND THE SABBATH

John 5:1-15

Today we're looking at the third of the signs performed by Jesus as recorded in John's gospel – the healing of a disabled man at the pool of Bethesda. As Giles was explaining to us last week John calls Jesus' miracles signs, because they are signposts pointing us towards Jesus. So let's study John's account of this miracle together and, as we do so, the relevant verses will be displayed on the screen, or you can find the main passage on page [***] of the church Bibles.

Well chapter 4 of John's gospel ended with Jesus in Galilee, having just healed the son of a Royal Official there. But we know from John's gospel – which seems to be laid out more chronologically than the synoptic gospels – that Jesus travelled back and forth between Judea and Galilee and verse 1 of our reading today finds Jesus in Jerusalem for the first of the five visits there recorded by John: “Some time later, Jesus went up to Jerusalem for a feast of the Jews.” (verse 1)

So John tells us why Jesus was in Jerusalem, although he doesn't specify precisely which feast it was. The phrase a “feast of the Jews” was often used for the feast of Tabernacles or Passover – but that seems to conflict with the timing of chapter 6 which involves the Passover, so we can't be sure exactly what feast John is referring to here.

John then sets the scene for the miracle in verses 2 and 3:

“Now there is in Jerusalem near the Sheep Gate a pool, which in Aramaic is called Bethesda and which is surrounded by five covered colonnades. Here a great number of disabled people used to lie—the blind, the lame, the paralysed.” (verses 2-3)

We're certainly dealing with real history here because the Pool of Bethesda with its five covered colonnades has been discovered in the North-East corner of Jerusalem – indeed I've visited it! The text doesn't actually say why the sick gathered there, but apparently they gathered at this pool because it seems to have been well known for its

supposed healing properties. The description of the pool continues in the second half of verse 3 and verse 4 which the NIV edition of the Bible omits because this seems to have been a later scribal addition to the manuscript. This omitted section explains how people believed that the healing properties of the pool were supposed to be triggered when an angel stirred the waters.

John then introduces us to the man who is to receive Jesus' healing power in verse 5:

“One who was there had been an invalid for thirty-eight years.” (verse 5)

We don't know what drew Jesus to this man. The only notable thing recorded is that his sickness is a long standing one – he had been paralysed for 38 years. In any event, Jesus doesn't wait for the man to approach him, but rather Jesus addresses him – look at verse 6:

“When Jesus saw him lying there and learned that he had been in this condition for a long time, he asked him, "Do you want to get well?"” (verse 6)

On the face of it that sounds like a strange question, but actually it's an extremely penetrating question. In those times a beggar often made quite a comfortable living out of begging and being cured would obviously mean the loss of that living. Also being crippled conditions one's whole way of life and being healed means radical change. This has relevance to everyone who's thinking of becoming a Christian. Are we ready for all the implications – including repentance of sins, leaving our old life and expressing a new loyalty to Christ. Becoming a Christian involves real and radical change in us and our lives.

The man's reply to Jesus is not encouraging, look at verse 7:

“"Sir," the invalid replied, "I have no-one to help me into the pool when the water is stirred. While I am trying to get in, someone else goes down ahead of me."” (verse 7)

The man is complaining about lack of help to assist him in curing his condition by popular means – he's not thinking about the help that Jesus can bring. The cripple is already being represented as a rather unattractive character – something that will be confirmed later in our

reading – but nevertheless Jesus extends his healing power to this man – see verse 8:

“Then Jesus said to him, "Get up! Pick up your mat and walk."”

(verse 8)

So we see that the man’s illness seems to have been some kind of paralysis or lameness. The verb used here in the Greek for *get up* (*egeire*) will be used again later in this chapter (verses 28 and 29) for the life-bringing effect of the call that Jesus will utter at the end of the age on the last day. The miracle of the healing here illustrates that call. But, for the crippled man, the command to *get up* is clear and gloriously relevant, Jesus can relate to and meet a long standing need. Jesus can relate to and meet the long standing needs of us all no matter how serious and long standing they may be.

Jesus commands the man to take his bed back home in witness to the reality of his miraculous cure, which was absolutely instantaneous. But, we now learn that this is the Sabbath and Jesus’ command leads to conflict with the authorities – look at verses 9 and 10:

“At once the man was cured; he picked up his mat and walked. The day on which this took place was a Sabbath, and so the Jews said to the man who had been healed, "It is the Sabbath; the law forbids you to carry your mat."” (verses 9-10)

Although the Jews – which here means the Jewish leaders or authorities – regarded carrying one’s bed on the Sabbath as a breach of Sabbath day observance, this was not really in accordance with the scriptural rules for the Sabbath (Exodus 20:8-11). The original scriptural principle was that one should not carry out one’s normal occupation on the Sabbath, and since the man was obviously not a furniture remover, carrying his bed home was not strictly a breach of the *scriptural* Sabbath rule. But the Pharisees had added 39 detailed laws complicating and changing the original principle of Sabbath rest. The letter of the Law had come to dominate its original spirit and the Law had become an end in itself. Many of these 39 rules had little to do with the original principle of the Sabbath – for example a rule had been added forbidding looking into a mirror on the Sabbath. That one would certainly have caused my wife to sin every Sabbath.

For the Pharisees, outward surface conformity replaced a real commitment of the heart. They had lost sight of the ultimate purpose of the law – its modelling a life which pleased God and witnessing to his gracious choice of Israel as his chosen people. The law had become an end in itself.

Jesus challenged this attitude, as both John and the synoptic gospels tell us. He taught that the Sabbath was not merely a rule for humans to keep, but God's gift to humans for their benefit. Indeed he also claimed that he himself had complete authority over the Sabbath.

Mark's gospel tells us both of those things:

“Then [Jesus] said to them, “The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. So the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath.””

(Mark 2:27-28 NIV)

The Sabbath was to be used to honor God and to benefit his people and since Jesus was Lord of the Sabbath he had more right than anyone else to act on the Sabbath.

This healing today marks the first conflict over the Sabbath between Jesus and the Jewish authorities. Many more were to come. This conflict really marks the beginning of the Jewish authorities intent to put Jesus to death – so it's really very significant.

Returning to the man who was healed, for the first time in 38 years the invalid was walking. There was probably a spring in his step, but then he heard a voice saying “Hey what are you doing carrying that bed – don't you know that's illegal on the Sabbath. You're breaking the Law.” That was the spirit of legalism at its worst. But, before we condemn the Jewish leaders too much, remember how often we exhibit the same spirit of legalism in the church. As Newbigin says “[the Jewish leaders] represent us.”

It's not in keeping laws that we're saved, but in our acceptance of God's grace – his amazing grace. This invalid had been healed of his long standing illness through God's grace and we can be healed of the sickness of our souls as well. Sometimes we can be healed of our physical illnesses, but we can always be healed of the sickness of our

souls. All we need to do is to turn to Christ with repentant hearts and acknowledge and believe in him as our Lord and Master.

Returning to our reading, it's notable that when the Jews confront the man they don't show any interest in his miraculous healing – see verse 10:

“and so the Jews said to the man who had been healed, "It is the Sabbath; the law forbids you to carry your mat.”” (verse 10)

the authorities have no interest in the miracle or even in the welfare of the man whose future life has been transformed. Certainly they have absolutely no interest in the healing miracle as a sign or pointer to who Jesus was. As I said a moment ago, their main focus was on their conflict with Jesus.

The man defends himself by saying that he's just doing what he was told to do – look at verse 11:

“But he replied, "The man who made me well said to me, ‘Pick up your mat and walk.’”” (verse 11)

and is immediately asked who it was who gave this instruction – see verse 12:

“So they asked him, "Who is this fellow who told you to pick it up and walk?”” (verse 12)

The man's personal limitations are clearly shown by his unawareness of who has healed him – look at verse 13:

“The man who was healed had no idea who it was, for Jesus had slipped away into the crowd that was there.” (verse 13)

In his ignorance this man is just like the majority of humankind today who do not acknowledge or worship God and yet daily receive his benefits of health and strength, the wonderful ordering and sustaining of the universe, as well as the daily restraining of the full potential of evil in the world and the full effects of the Fall in personal life – to say nothing of the patience with which God delays the day of his final judgement (2 Peter 3:1f.).

Some time later, we don't know exactly how much later, as the word used here translated as *later* represents an indefinite amount of time, Jesus meets the man again – look at verse 14:

“Later Jesus found him at the temple and said to him, “See, you are well again. Stop sinning or something worse may happen to you.”” (verse 14)

When Jesus says “you are well again” he’s speaking in the perfect tense, so we can take it that the man’s healing was permanent. He tells the man to “stop sinning” – implying that the man *is* sinning. Now, sickness and sin are not invariably linked – Jesus specifically denies any such universal linkage in chapter 9 of John’s gospel (John 9:1-3), but in this case there does appear to have been some linkage – although Jesus may only have been speaking of the eternal heavenly consequences of sin. Certainly Jesus warns the man of the need to respond to the grace of God in his life by repenting of his sin. We need to be aware of that and regularly repent of our sins in response to the amazing magnificent grace God has shown us in sending his Son to die for us on the cross. That’s why we have a time of confession as part of our service today and indeed every Sunday morning.

It’s pretty clear that the man isn’t hearing what Jesus is saying to him, instead of falling at Jesus’ feet and expressing his thankfulness for his deliverance he wastes no time in seeking out the Jewish authorities and informing them about Jesus – see verse 15:

“The man went away and told the Jews that it was Jesus who had made him well.” (verse 15)

Now the former invalid must have been well aware that this would cause trouble for Jesus – the person who had healed him and transformed his life. That’s why I said earlier that the man who was healed seems to have been an unattractive character, indeed an unpleasant and ungrateful character. This healing is in total contrast with the healing of the son of the Royal Official we looked at last week. The Royal Official approached Jesus with at least some faith, believing that Jesus could heal his son and gradually exhibiting increasing faith in Jesus and knowledge of who he was. But, in our passage today, there’s no evidence that the invalid had any faith in Jesus either before his healing or afterwards, and at the time he was

healed he didn't even know who Jesus was – nor does he appear to have developed any faith or appreciation of who Jesus was later.

Yet Jesus expended his healing power to this unpleasant individual. What a comfort that is to us, to know that no matter how unpleasant and unattractive we may be in our individual lives, Jesus will still extend his healing power to us. Christ's healing is for us all no matter how unlovely or unworthy. Like the man in our reading, Christ's healing may not lead us to live Godlier or better lives. But when we receive Christ's healing, either physically or the healing he extends to all our souls, let us not be like the man in our reading and respond with an utter lack of thankfulness – rather let us fall on our knees in worship and thank our God for his amazing grace.

Let's just close with a few words of prayer. Father God we thank you that you extend your healing to us no matter how unworthy, ungrateful and unpleasant we may be as individuals. We thank you for your amazing grace that whilst we were still sinners you sent your Son Jesus Christ to die on the cross for the forgiveness of our sins and the healing of our souls. Father we don't want to be like the man in our reading today and fail to thank you for your grace and mercy – so we now offer you our thanks and praise and worship for all your love and grace and healing and we resolve to continue to thank you this day and forevermore. Amen.