

Father, may these spoken words be faithful to your written word and lead us to the living Word, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen

There are events in the Bible that are so overlaid with symbolism and meaning that trying to unpack them feels like opening a Russian nesting doll set: you take out the next doll, marvel at its beauty, then see that there is yet another doll to unpack. The healing of the paralytic in John five is one of those events. The act of healing itself, the loaded question "Wilt thou be made whole?", the presence of water and all the symbolism of that, the act of healing on the Sabbath — each facet of the story worthy of its own reflection, each rich for exploration and contemplation. Before we unpack the dolls, we remember a basic rule when reading the bible; we should try to understand the text in the same way as the first readers understood it. Only then will we be able to apply its message to our lives today.

When Jesus arrived in Jerusalem, he found his way to a famous pool. Its name was either Bethesda, which means House of Mercy, or more likely, Bethzatha which means House of the Olive. William Barclay tells us that the better manuscripts all have the second name, and we know from Josephus that there was a quarter of Jerusalem actually known as Bethzatha. This pool was fed by an underground spring, and when the spring overflowed, it would bubble up from beneath causing a disturbance in the waters above. In Jesus' day there was a legend that this rippling of the waters was caused by the fluttering of angels' wings, so that the first person to enter the turbulent waters would be cured.

To us this is mere superstition. But, it was the kind of belief which was spread all over the ancient world and still exists in some places today. People believed in all kinds of spirits and demons. The air was thick with them, every pool had its resident spirit.

So to our first doll. According to John, Jesus met a man who had been coming to the pool of Bethzatha for thirty-eight years in hopes of being healed, but because he was paralyzed, he had no means of getting into the water on his own, never mind getting there first. So, Jesus asked, "Wilt thou be made whole?"

The sick man answered him, "Sir, I have no man, when the water is troubled, to put me into the pool: but while I am coming, another steppeth down before me." Jesus said to him, "Rise, take up thy bed, and walk." Immediately, the man was made well, and took up his mat and walked.

Now, at first, Jesus' question seems like such an odd thing to ask: "Do you want to be made well?" What kind of question is that? Why, of course, he wanted to be made well. He'd been coming to the pool of Bethzatha all his life. Why else would he have been there?

Yet, if we think about it, thirty-eight years is a long time to wait for a miracle, especially when the conditions were obviously impossible to meet. From his own admission, he had no hope of reaching the water before the others. You have to wonder why he kept coming back, day after day, year after year. Given the circumstances, he had no reasonable chance of ever being made well. So, in this sense, it was a good question: "Do you (really) want to be made well?" Because, if you do, you're going about it the wrong way. Unless something changes, it's not going to happen.

In time, lying in the portico by the pool of Bethzatha became his way of life. For thirty-eight years, it was all he'd ever known. So, when Jesus asked, "Do you want to be made well?" he would have had good reason to think twice, for to be made well would mean he'd have to give up his old way of life. In his heart of hearts the man might be content to remain an invalid for, if he was cured, he would have to shoulder all the burden of making a living. Maybe it wasn't such a stupid question after all. Thirty-eight years is a long time to be able to settle into a kind of comfort and safety even in misery. Being well holds more responsibilities. Being well holds more accountability.

But the man responded quickly. He wanted to be healed, but he didn't see how since he had no one to help him up when the waters stirred within the pool. Still, Jesus had to know if the man really wanted to receive the gift of healing. So he quickly got to the heart of the matter: "Rise, take up thy bed, and walk."

Jesus spoke the word, but God's healing power succeeded only when the man assumed the responsibility of choosing life and risking the possibility of transformation! What's true then is still true for us.

Now we come to the question behind the question!

So we come to the second doll. The deeper question Jesus asks is, "Do you really want to be changed?" If we are content to stay as we are -- no matter how miserable that may be -- there can be no change, no possibility of healing for us. It is almost as if Jesus said to the man: "Bend your will to it and you and I will do this thing together!" God's power never dispenses with the effort of man. The absolute truth is that we all must recognise our own utter helplessness apart

from God. However, we must also realise it is also true that miracles can happen when our will cooperates with God's power to make them possible.

In effect Jesus was commanding the man to attempt the impossible. "Rise, take up thy bed, and walk." he said. The man might well have said with sarcasm that for thirty-eight years his bed had been carrying him and there was not much sense in telling him to carry it. But he made the effort along with Jesus and it was done. Here is the road to achievement. There are so many things in this world which defeat us. But when we have genuine desire and determination to make the effort, hopeless though it may seem, the power of God gets its opportunity, and with him we can conquer what for long has conquered us.

The question Jesus asks is the ultimate question each of us must answer, "Do you really want to be made well?" Or perhaps put another way with the third doll; do we want to experience life in all its abundance? I suspect, for many of us, we're so accustomed to our predictable, safe pattern of living that we become unaware there's more to which God is calling us. We get so accustomed to the familiar -- day after day, week after week, month after month, year after year -- that we fail to realise the difference between living and simply existing. Maybe we need to try a new approach.

Jesus doesn't help the man into the water. He comes to him on his mat, the same mat and situation the man so wants to escape, and speaks words of life and resurrection. "Get up off your bed!", or to quote Jesus more accurately, "Rise, take up thy bed, and walk." The man doesn't leave his bed behind. It goes with him. His circumstances are real. The difference is he now carries them. They no longer carry him.

Jesus doesn't change our outer circumstances. He changes us. He calls us into a new way of being, seeing, acting, speaking, thinking. When we stand and rise to that new life we discover that circumstances have somehow changed. That doesn't necessarily make life easy or mean we no longer have to deal with the circumstances of life. It makes our circumstances more manageable and we engage them from a different place and position. There is freedom where there was once imprisonment. Inertia gives way to creativity. Once stagnant waters now bubble with new life.

Let us pray.

Grant us courage to take up our beds and walk into that fullness of life which is experienced only in trusting the risen Christ so that we may fully become the people you have made us to be. In Jesus name. Amen.