

Dorset South & West. Written Service.
Sunday 25th May. The Question is....?
Prepared by Revd Jean Quick.

Call to Worship. Psalm 67:1-5

May God be gracious to us and bless us and make his face shine on us
so that your ways may be known on earth, your salvation among all nations.
May the peoples praise you, God; may all the peoples praise you.
May the nations be glad and sing for joy, for you rule the peoples with equity
and guide the nations of the earth. May the peoples praise you, God; may all
the peoples praise you.



STF 73

Fill thou my life, O Lord my God,
in every part with praise,
that my whole being may proclaim
thy being and thy ways.

Not for the lip of praise alone
nor e'en the praising heart
I ask, but for a life made up
of praise in every part:

Praise in the common things of life,
its goings out and in;
praise in each duty and each deed,
however small and mean.

Fill every part of me with praise;
let all my being speak
of thee and of thy love, O Lord,
poor though I be and weak.

So shalt thou, gracious Lord, from me
receive the glory due;
and so shall I begin on earth
the song for ever new.

So shall no part of day or night
from sacredness be free;
but all my life, in every step,
be fellowship with thee.

Prayers of adoration and confession

God of grace and glory, to this worried world, you reveal your presence in radiant glory and in gentle whispers, on mountain tops and in shadowed valleys, in classrooms and hospital beds, in homes and churches, in the quiet of nature and on busy streets. Yours is the presence that pushes past our fear to calm us; yours is the love that transforms our doubt with reassurance. We come to dwell in your goodness and to offer you the praise you deserve.

God of mercy and forgiveness, we confess that many things keep us from trusting fully in your love. We are often distracted by our own desires and disappointments. We cling to anger and resentment. We fear for the future rather than seek signs of hope. Forgive us. Shine your love upon us so that your glory may be seen in us, and give us courage to follow Jesus wherever he leads, we ask this in his name. **Amen**

Bible reading : John 5:1-9

Some time later, Jesus went up to Jerusalem for one of the Jewish festivals. 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. One who was there had been an invalid for thirty-eight years. 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?” “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.” Then Jesus said to him, “Get up! Pick up your mat and walk.” At once the man was cured; he picked up his mat and walked. The day on which this took place was a Sabbath,

Reflection

What makes people ask the strangest of questions when the answer is staring them in the face? For example you're standing at the bus stop and someone asks, “Are You Waiting For The Bus?” My quirky side would love to answer with some quip like no I'm the equivalent of a train spotter, but collecting bus numbers instead! Actually that's quite feasible as the local bus company has taken to decorating the inside of some buses to reflect the relevant holiday season. Have you ridden on the bus decorated up with flowers and paper eggs for Easter? Do we have another strange question in our bible reading today? A lame Man's almost taken root, lying beside the pool of Bethesda for 38 years. He's been hoping that one day he might be able to get into the pool and experience a miracle. Jesus sees him and asks “Do you want to get well?” Now we wouldn't be tempted to give Jesus a sarcastic answer *would we?* A: “No I'm just enjoying the view!”

Perhaps these seemingly obvious situations that lead to these questions, are about the person just trying to engage in conversation with us and ascertain whether we need help. Wondering where we are going or just to be friendly. However Jesus' seemingly unnecessary question is much deeper than that. As we take a closer look at one of the most poignant questions Jesus asked, “Do you want to be made well?” I think we will find

that, even though it was asked of a man who was paralysed from birth, it speaks to us, as well, because to be made well is to be made whole, and to be made whole is to experience the gift of life in all its abundance. That means change and going in a new direction and trusting in what is yet to be. A new experience for you. The last requirement of Jesus is certainly challenging. If for thirty eight years you have been dependent upon others. You now need to pick up your own bed and deal with. Get on your own two feet and walk. If we sit too long we can feel stiff and it's not easy to get moving. What if you have been immobile for years? So as fantastic as this healing miracle sounds it demanded something of the man and possibly some challenging times ahead as he adapted to his new life.

The story is set in the city of Jerusalem. John says, "After these things, Jesus went up to Jerusalem for one of the Jewish festivals." In Jesus' day the Jewish calendar contained three high and holy days – Passover, Pentecost and Tabernacles. If you were a devout Jew living within sixteen miles of Jerusalem, you were expected to attend them all. If you lived away from Jerusalem, you were expected to attend at least one each year. Jesus was a devout Jew, and, like other devout Jews, he made pilgrimage to the holy city as often as possible to observe the feast days.

John says when Jesus got to Jerusalem he entered the city by the Sheep Gate and went to the pool of Bethesda which was nearby. I have been fortunate to visit Jerusalem a number of times and despite being a lover of all places where there's water I am not sure that the pool of Bethesda would have been the first place I would want to visit. The pool is near the Sheep Gate which still stands today. It was called the Sheep Gate because shepherds would drive their sheep into Jerusalem through this gate and on over to the Pool of Bethesda to the right, where they would be washed before taken to the temple for sacrifice. The pool of Bethesda was separated by a dividing wall in the middle, creating two bodies of water. The sheep were washed at one end of the pool, and people bathed at the other end.

Not my ideal swimming hole! The noise and smell and would there be ticks and sheep's nasty bits in the water? When I was in Bali I remember wanting to go to a renowned tourist spot that was thought to be a spiritual healing pool. The journey involved a very long arduous drive for my taxi driver to Banjar Hot Springs. I took one look and wanted to turn around but my friendly driver was insistent, we had come all this way and I was going in! The guide book says, "Banjar, is a fantastic destination that includes a cultural experience and a healing experience. The hot springs date back several hundred of years all the way back to the Dutch colonial times. Most of its history is quite unknown but it is known to have been used over the centuries by the Balinese for spiritual and cleansing purposes. The sulphuric waters are said to have healing properties, so taking a dip in the pastel green waters may just be what your spirit needs."



The green in the photo shows it at it's best! Imagine, the smell of sulphur, multitudes of hot sweaty bodies and the flies! Before getting to the destination, I wanted to take the experience of the Holy Springs. Getting there was a very different experience, the reality almost robbed me of what entering the springs was to lead too. It wasn't a pleasant experience but it did open up a whole new perspective for me on the real Balinese world. My driver was so happy that I had braved the waters and he wanted to share that with his friends and family. An outsider who really cared enough to engage in one of their holy experiences. He was so enthusiastic and wanted to tell me about his faith and take me to visit his family and the holy places that were important to him. Maybe the question for me at that pool was well do you really want to engage in a faith experience? How different things would have been if my prejudice's had stopped me from getting into the water. I wouldn't have met the taxi drivers family or hopefully been an encouraging visitor.

The pool of Bethesda sounds in some ways idyllic. Around the sides of the pool where the people bathed, there were five porticos. So architecturally it seemed interesting. However under the porticos, people with various infirmities gathered in the hopes of being healed. According to John, "In these porticos lay a great multitude of those who were sick, blind, lame, or paralysed..."

I wonder if we were to think of some local beauty water spot and when we went to visit we found a great multitude of 'sick, blind, lame, or paralysed', lying around there, what would our reaction be? Would we even want to engage in any sort of conversation or questions? We only have to think about the harbour area or the seafront at Weymouth and especially the sheltered seating areas, to know what the reality would be. What would hit our senses. Have we ever asked these people why they are there and what they really might want?

The pool of Bethesda 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. The holy springs in Bali are also renowned for their healing properties but without any legendary tales.

According to John, Jesus met a man who had been coming to the pool of Bethesda for thirty-eight years in hopes of being healed, but because he was paralysed, he had no means of getting into the water on his own, much less getting there first. And so, Jesus asked, "Do you want to be made well?" The sick man answered him, "Sir, I have no one to put me into the pool when the water is stirred up, but while I'm coming, another steps down before me." You can almost hear the unsaid thoughts of this person. "Same old story, nothing ever changes, no one wants to be bothered about me". The hope in this man seems to have given way to

hopelessness. So why does he keep returning every day just to be disappointed? We perhaps can think of so many scenarios that are similar. We have a hope for better things but we can't get past the expectations that we will be disappointed. Jesus asks, "Do you want to be made well?"

When you think about the man in our Bible reading, thirty-eight years is a long time to wait for a miracle, especially when the conditions were so obviously impossible to meet. From the man's 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 gives, it's not going to happen.

There's a lesson to be learned here: When it comes to being made well, physically or otherwise, repetition is not necessarily a virtue. Too often we simply repeat misinformation, rehearse old prejudices, practice tired patterns of behaviour and replay thoughts and opinions formed years ago without first checking to see if they're still valid and, more importantly, if they serve the cause of a healthy faith and good practice.

Jesus asks us today, "Do you want to be made well?" Do you want to experience life in all its abundance? If you answer yes, perhaps you need to try a new approach. I wonder if being self sufficient was on the man's agenda once he was healed. No more relying on others but actually doing things for himself and for others.

We might feel that things never change or go the way we want them to, but are we prepared to change the conditions so that the things we say we desire can happen? Or have we become comfortable with what is familiar? Are we willing to take responsibility for ourselves and to dare to make changes in how we see or do things? Are we willing to do things differently. Roll up our symbolic mats and move on? Perhaps to alter our routine. Change our diet. Cultivate new friendships. Break old habits. Learn new techniques. Are we prepared to take that all important first step toward experiencing a life of wholeness and wellbeing? To do so will require venturing out of our comfort zones and to assess where we actually are? If Jesus were to put the question to you, next time you have a moan or a groan, "Do you want to get well?" What is our considered answer? Because it needs consideration. Jesus' response to the paralysed man wasn't to say anything like, "Ok I will take care of this for you, you just rest on your mat". Jesus was intent on healing him but he expected him to be proactive with his life and his health. Only when he stood up and picked up his mat, only then was he healed. Often when people are grieving we might say to them, "is this what your loved one would want for you?" When we feel that life is passing us by, we are feeling hopeless and helpless we need to ask, "Is this where God wants me to be?" Is he calling us to pick up our 'mat' and do something about this problem. Stand on our own two feet. Then we will feel life in the fullness that Jesus wants us to have.

When questions are put to us, too often we are indecisive, we respond with things like, "you choose", or "whatever you think is best". Imagine if that had been the response of the paralysed person. Actually the person didn't really answer the question, he just gave the excuse for why he was in the state that he was in.

One wonders why for thirty eight years he hadn't found anyone he could ask to help him into the pool. For 13,870 days; if he hadn't missed a day; no one had been asked to give him a hand? To be fair the waters apparently only bubbled up occasionally, so it was a game of watching and waiting. Perhaps volunteers couldn't be asked to give an undefined amount of time to help. Or maybe he missed the opportunity for a whole lot of other reasons, some of which he gave. The fact is that in the end it wasn't about the right time or conditions. The question was did he really want to be made whole?

When you're watching television or listening to the radio and something comes on that you don't like you have to make the decision to change channels and choose a different program. Or suffer the consequences of feeling uncomfortable and dissatisfied with what is unfolding. A simple illustration but one that is the answer to the question Jesus puts. We need to decide what we really want and what we are prepared to do to make changes to accept a new reality. However we know in the real world we can't have everything just the way that we feel is right. We have to accept the gift as it is given, trusting that God is with us. When we think about how someone might respond to a question about what they want out of life. They could respond with an answer that is self-centred and not in their best interests. The man in our reading could have responded, "yes I do want to be well and to have a house and servants and plenty to make life so comfortable, a recompense for these last years of misery!"

However when we look at the sequence of events in this healing miracle we get a glimpse of what Jesus would want to be our response to his question. The man encounters Jesus, Jesus asks him what he wants, he offers a muddled answer but he is heard. He is given an instruction to get up and get on with life in a new way for him, that actually isn't out of the ordinary. Only when he lets go of his old ways and responds to the request of Jesus is he healed.

What's standing in your way? What sort of things do you need to change about your life in order to be whole? Are there things you need to let go of? For example, are you holding on to anger, nursing some injustice or hurt from years back? Are you holding on to grief, looking back to something or someone you once held dear? Perhaps you're holding on to a destructive habit, wanting to be healthy and whole, but not willing to stop destructive or negative thoughts or practices. The gospel reading ends on a positive note. Jesus tells the man, "Arise, take up your mat, and walk." Immediately, the man was made well, and took up his mat and walked. The Good News is that Jesus came into the world that we might have life and have it abundantly. (John 10:10) The question is, do you want to be made well?

STF 518

Father, hear the prayer we offer:
not for ease that prayer shall be,
but for strength that we may ever
live our lives courageously.

Not for ever in green pastures
do we ask our way to be;
but the steep and rugged pathway
may we tread rejoicingly.

Not for ever by still waters
would we idly rest and stay;
but would strike the living fountains
from the rocks along our way.

Be our strength in hours of weakness,
in our wanderings be our guide;
through endeavour, failure, danger,
Father, be there at our side.

Prayers of Intercessionusing our Hands

Place your hands on your lap (palm upwards) and clench your fists.

As we pray, we remember the many people that we spend our time with, or know of, either through acquaintances or the media, who also have an influence on our lives. As you pray each prayer I ask you to stretch out each finger one at a time.

- **Thumb:** Pray for family and friends – that they would know health and peace and that we would be a helpful, loving influence to them.
- **Index:** Pray for those in the workplace (or who are seeking a job) and those in education – that they would be a godly example to their colleagues and friends.
- **Middle:** Pray for the leaders within the church, in the wider community and in government – that they would know wisdom, demonstrate good leadership and a clear sense of direction.
- **Ring:** Pray for those who are ill, poor and most in need – that they may know healing of mind and body and receive all that they need. This finger says that the wearer is committed in a relationship. However many are left to live alone. Remember those who may feel lonely or neglected.
- **Little finger:** Pray for yourself and your own needs at this time. This finger is not as strong as the others and it is smaller. Let us pray for those who feel inferior or marginalised.

At the end of these prayers **our hands** should be wide open, a reminder of our openness and availability to give and receive love for others. Let us pray that God will direct us to use our hands to do His will as we join them together to say**the Lord's Prayer**.

STF 476

One more step along the world I go,
one more step along the world I go;
from the old things to the new
keep me travelling along with you:

Chorus

*And it's from the old I travel to the new;
keep me travelling along with you.*

Round the corners of the world I turn,
more and more about the world I learn;
all the new things that I see
you'll be looking at along with me:

As I travel through the bad and good,
keep me travelling the way I should;
where I see no way to go
you'll be telling me the way, I know:

Give me courage when the world is rough,
keep me loving though the world is tough;
leap and sing in all I do,
keep me travelling along with you:

You are older than the world can be,
you are younger than the life in me;
ever old and ever new,
keep me travelling along with you:

The pool at Bethesda



The Blessing

Lord God, we rejoice in your greatness and power,
your gentleness and love, your mercy and justice.
Enable us by your Spirit to honour you in our
thoughts, and words and actions,
and to serve you in every aspect of our lives;
through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.**

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