

## Well?

9 5 10

God our redeemer,  
you have delivered us from the power of darkness  
and brought us into the kingdom of your Son:  
grant, that as by his death he has recalled us to life,  
so by his continual presence in us he may raise us to eternal joy.

My text may be found in John chapter 5 and verse 6:

‘Do you want to be made well?’

Most of what we say falls into two broad categories: questions and statements. Interviews on the Radio 4 Today programme are a good example of both. The presenter asks the questions; the politician tries to answer. It often makes me smile how quickly what is being said is interrupted as truth is sought at the expense of politeness.

Questions can go to the heart of the matter. They may not simply be an opening gambit to a conversation, inviting someone to speak; they may not simply be a request for information, a desire to find out something; they may in fact be an invitation to the person questioned to reflect on the hidden truth which they know but don't, for one reason or another, like to admit.

The passage from John's gospel is one of Jesus' miracles of healing. The Synoptic gospels are full of accounts of him healing people, restoring the sick to health. In John, there are only three or four and this is the second: the healing of the lame man at the pool of Beth-zatha or Bethesda as the Authorised Version terms it.

Bethesda means House of Mercy; Beth-zatha, House of the Olive. In Jerusalem at the time, there was a whole district called Beth-zatha and this is the more likely though not the most resonant name for the place.

Jesus has gone up to Jerusalem for an unspecified festival: there were three major pilgrim festivals: Pesach, Shavuot and Succot; Passover, Pentecost and Tabernacles. We can't be certain which one it is but William Barclay thinks it may well have been Pentecost or Shavuot to give it its name in Hebrew title.

The incident occurs at a pool by the Sheep Gate. The pool is fed by an underground stream and at times when the water is stirred up by the increased pressure of water flowing into the pool, there was a belief at that time that the first person to enter the water would be cured. This belief was rooted in the notion that there was an angel present in the water who at certain times endowed it with healing properties. Such belief in the healing powers found in sacred rivers and wells is ancient and this pool is just one example of many such places. Alongside the pool, offering shade and shelter to the sick, were five porticoes, a covered walkway supported by columns.

Here Jesus found a lame man who had been unable to walk for 38 years. The astonishing length of his illness is matched by what seems like an astonishing question which is my text today: 'Do you want to be made well?' You would think the answer was obvious – of course! But is it? Perhaps the unnamed man has got so used to being ill that being ill is an essential part of what it means to be him. Perhaps after 38 years, being an invalid, being passive, is the only way he can cope with life?

The man's answer is plausible enough: 'Sir I have no one to put me into the pool when the water is stirred up and while I am making my way, someone else steps down ahead of me.' It is a sad truth that we can be on our own, friendless, with no one to help us in our need. What this man says he lacks is help. But now that help is at hand. Jesus tells him, orders him, commands him to stand up, to take up his mat and to walk. And he does. Astonishingly, against the odds, against all likelihood, a cripple, a lame man, stops being passive but actively responds to what Jesus tells him to do and he finds he has the ability to pick up his pallet bed on which he has lain for 38 years and to walk off into a whole new life!

I love Jesus' miracles of healing but they are not casual acts of kindness: they have a resonance and relevance for us or John would not have bothered to record them in his gospel. Today, I believe the relevance of the healing of the lame man at Beth-zatha or Bethesda is found in Jesus' question which is my text today: 'Do we want to be made well?' We may well be comfortable where we are; we may prefer to be passive rather than active; we may have become so used to what

troubles us that our illness is part of who we are. God offers us wholeness but perhaps we do want to be healed. Well, do we? Do you?

I have spoken in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,  
Amen.

*Preached at the Eucharist*

*St Bartholomew's Dinard*

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F: Sermon 22: Well

