

Holy Water

5 5 13

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.

Our text is a phrase from Psalm 67, the second half of the first verse:

'The light of his countenance'

There are many blessings in this life, not least the blessing of being in good health. There is the blessing of being part of a church where there are young families like the Hancocks. And for the Hancocks, there is the blessing and joy of seeing their children growing up, not least little Maëlle being baptised today. And from the Bible are many forms of blessing, not least one using the phrase that is our text today: **'May the light of his countenance shine upon you.'**

Being bathed in the light of Jesus, having the light of his presence in our lives is one of the promises implicit in our baptism. It is symbolised by the presentation of a candle lit from our Pascal Candle which Maëlle will be given at the end of that ceremony. But this morning, given our gospel reading from St John, I'd like to look briefly at an example of the healing properties of water.

The healing of this paralysed man who's been ill for 38 years takes place round a pool near the Sheep Gate in Jerusalem. Around the pool, where once presumably sheep were watered, stood five porticos under which those who were ill might shelter and wait for the water of the pool to be agitated by what verse four describes as a presence of an angel. Whosoever thereafter is the first to enter the pool will be cured of whatever illness or disease currently afflicts them. Around the world, there are many examples of healing from holy wells or pools, streams or rivers. The Holy Well at Walsingham, for example, at the shrine of the Blessed Virgin Mary was thought to have healing properties and the virtues of the water at Spas such as Bath or Baden Baden were popular in the 18th century. 19th century Dinard owes its development as a balnéaire, a seaside resort, partly due to the Victorian and Edwardian belief in the virtues of bathing in the sea.

But let's return to the first century Jerusalem and the pool by the Sheep Gate. If, like me, you were brought up on the Authorised Version of the Bible, then from the back of your mind, you may recall that the pool that our pew Bibles name Bethzatha, in the King James Bible is called Bethesda. Scholars believe the best reading of the place name is Bethzatha – the House of the Olive – rather than Bethesda – the House of Mercy.

Nor does the NRSV contain verse four which here I quote in full from the King James Bible: 'For an angel went down at a certain season into the pool and troubled the water; whosoever then first after the troubling of the water stepped in was made whole of whatsoever disease he had.' The reason for its current omission is the verse is probably a later insert to explain the phenomenon of a

pool of still water suddenly bubbling up. Sadly, verse four is absent from the earliest and best versions of John's gospel.

So Jesus is standing at the edge of the pool and he is looking not at the water for the presence of a healing angel but at the sick gathered there in the hope of healing. And his eyes focus on one man in particular who has been ill for 38 years. Now we don't know how Jesus knew how long the man had been ill, nor are we told the exact nature of the man's illness, though it is reasonable to guess that he is paralysed in some way or other since the man tells Jesus that he would need help to be the first down into the pool.

Jesus asks him a surprising question – **'Do you want to be made well?'** – and the man's response suggests he does so Jesus simply tells him to stand up and pick up his mat and walk – and he does ! The simple shock is that the man is healed and he never even got wet in the process !

Well, in her baptism, Maëlle will get wet a little. We don't normally practise baptism by total immersion in the Anglican Church but it sounds fun. Instead, just a few symbolic drops of water are sufficient to suggest the healing and purification that is implicit in a belief in Jesus as Lord and Saviour, the source of living water. And were we to drink of that living water, then spiritually we too would never thirst again.

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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G: Sermon 27 : Holy water

