

A question of choice

1 5 16

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

Our text may be found in the gospel according to John, chapter 5 and verse 6:

‘Do you want to be made well?’

Do you ? Do you want to be well ? Well, do you ? What are the lengths you’re prepared to go to in order to insure, as far as you can, that your health will be as good as it can be, given your age and past medical history ? I guess I’m a bit obsessed with trying my best to be healthy. I don’t smoke – anymore. I try not to eat and drink too much. I try to exercise most days. I go to bed early and get up early. I’ve got a range of pills I take every day: Cod-lover Oil; Glucosamine Sulphate; Lutein; Saw Palmetto; Multivitamins ! So when Jesus asks the sick man, lying by the pool of Beth-zatha by the Sheep Gate coming into Jerusalem, ‘Do **you want to be made well ?**’, he has my attention big-time.

The question on the surface seems straight forward enough – does he want to get better, be better ? And the man answers Jesus honestly not with a yes or a no but simply by pointing to the evidence: **‘Sir, I have no one to put me in the pool when**

the water is stirred up; and while I am making my way, someone else steps down, ahead of me.’ So his answer is a yes in 31 words according to the NRSV, 26 in the King James Bible but just 23 in the original New Testament Greek. Then and only then does Jesus heal the man ‘Stand up, take up your mat and walk.’ And he does!

So why do you think that Jesus asks the man first if he really wants to be better? I’m guessing that Jesus wants to be sure that this is what the man truly wants. I’m guessing that Jesus wants to be sure that he has the man’s permission first. In his miracles of healing, the person healed often comes to Jesus to ask to be healed or someone who loves them asks on their behalf. Here, Jesus has the evidence of his eyes and his ears and only then does he act. Of course, it is possible that the man is now defined by his illness. 38 years is half a life-time and to be cured has the potential to turn his life upside down. In a way, he may have become so used to his illness that to be well again will really knock him off his feet so-to-speak.

And this possibility of choice of saying yes to God or refusing his offer is at the heart of our faith. The idea we have a choice and can exercise choice is part of the story of the Fall, of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden who wrongly choose to disobey God by eating of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. And we in turn do have a choice as to whether or not we respond positively to God’s love for us. Love can never be compelled – it is a free gift, freely given, freely bestowed on the one we love. And God is giving us the chance to love him as he loves us.

But are we really free to choose ? Does our age, sex, background affect how we see things ? Are we too young to make so sensible a choice or too old to be flexible enough to change direction ? We may be too cowardly or too proud, too sad or too bad to say yes to God and let him love us through his Son and the presence of the Holy Spirit in our lives.

God is our Father, Abba, Daddy, but whether we say yes or not to him is a choice we can only make for ourselves – Good luck !

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

Preached at the Eucharist

St Mary the Virgin and All Saints, Potters Bar

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G: Sermons 33 : Love

