

John Chapter 5, the first 13 verses, and in the New International Version bible that I'm reading from here it's entitled "The healing at the pool".

[Reading John 5:1-15]

There's the passage we're looking at this morning.

In actual fact the pool of Bethesda, the remains of that pool, are still to be found in the ruins of Jerusalem; Jerusalem's one of those cities that whenever they want to build a new building, they try to dig out the foundations but they just know they're going to find the remains of of a previous building – I think that one of the things that's happened is that as they tried to rebuild something they found the remains of what they think is this very pool where Jesus spoke to this man, the Pool of Bethesda.

Around this pool it was a desperate gathering of people. Down through human history humanity, human beings, we've never known quite how to respond positively to people with disabilities. In years gone by people with disabilities, be it mental health issues or physical issues, so often what we've done we locked them up, and you may have heard that what is now the Imperial War Museum used to be the Bethlehem Hospital, and, of course, the word "Bethlehem" was shortened to "Bedlam". And so those of you who know that word "bedlam" describing anarchy and chaos, that's where the word bedlam comes from – it comes from the Bethlehem, or Bedlam, Hospital. And so sadly people who were immensely vulnerable in centuries and years gone by, instead of responding with compassion to their situations, we so often locked them up somewhere so we didn't have to deal with their difficult behaviour – we locked them up and pretended they didn't exist.

When we stopped doing that sort of thing we still continue to patronise people (a bit like Anna was describing earlier - "I know better than you know your needs so therefore I'm going to do what I know's right for you without asking you whether it's right") and sometimes pretending they don't exist. And those have been responses that have been given down through the years to people with disabilities. Of course this often leaves people with those disabilities desperately searching for a solution.

For the people we have described that are standing or lying around the pool, in our picture there, these were people who were desperately searching for a miraculous solution to their situation. They were people with nowhere else to turn, desperate people – they were clinging to the possibility of divine intervention. And it seems as though Jesus intentionally chose to go to this place. Human nature is often that we try and hide away and avoid those places; Jesus searched out this pool of Bethesda to go there and to meet someone, knowing he had a sort of divine meeting that he was to have with someone around this pool.

And there he come across a disappointed man – he heard the man had been there so many decades, waiting for healing, waiting for God to intervene in his situation. Imagine the sense of disappointment this man must have lived with in his life. Now we don't know the exact nature of this man's condition – it clearly stopped him being able to move quickly, as he said in verse 7: "When the waters stir..." (and supposedly the idea from the Jewish people was that the angle of the Lord was moving over the waters, and if you got into the water as that happened, the idea was

you could be healed, or you would be healed, but he said) "...every time the waters moved he wasn't quick enough to get into the water and so somebody else got in before him."

This man had been disappointed by his religion: the Jewish festival was going on in his very city but nobody was with him to celebrate this Jewish festival, no-one cared about his needs as the faithful came into the city to worship. And all his religious leaders could offer him was the ridiculously insensitive Rule: when this man had been healed, after decades of waiting, the only thing the religious leaders could say to him was; "What are you doing picking up that mat?" I mean, talk about missing the point and jumping on something unimportant when something amazing has happened? But sadly these religious leaders jumped on the letter of the Law rather than giving glory to God for something amazing that had happened; they told him off for picking up his bedroll on the Sabbath.

But this man had also been disappointed by superstition because this whole business of the waters stirring and the Spirit of the Lord, and if you get into the water when the waters stir you'll be healed – that smacks to me of superstition, not of real faith that God is with you in your time of disability, and in all times in your life.

And so this man had been disappointed in so many ways throughout his life. And so I think that's why Jesus asks him a searching question. He asked him a searching question: "Do you **want** to get well?"

"Do you **want** to get well?" You see this man might have given up all hope after so much disappointment. The idea of being able to walk and to be restored might have been too scary for him because he'd got used to being the way that he was. He might have been able to make money out of being unable to walk, and so actually didn't want to be healed because that was his way of finding enough money to survive in his life.

The man's response is interesting, isn't it, because he obviously didn't know who Jesus was, and so he didn't see him as someone who could potentially transform his life. He didn't know who Jesus was, and this would have been at a time when Jesus, this amazing preacher and healer, was becoming really well known in Jerusalem and in the surrounding area. But this man who was isolated had not heard about who this man Jesus was.

In fact it's interesting the man made no profession of faith throughout the whole passage – Jesus usually heals people in response to their faith in him. But in this passage Jesus proves that he was not limited by the lack of faith – because this man made no profession of faith. Jesus worked here despite this man's limited expectations, and I'm so glad about that as it means that God will work with me; and I would suggest that God will work you, even in your limited expectations!

There's that lovely story of a man who was seeking healing for his daughter, and Jesus said "to have faith," and he said "Lord I believe, but help my unbelief!" It's like the man was saying, "I've got this much faith, a little mustard seed of faith – Lord, help it grow, make it bigger, make it stronger!" I don't know about you but that's so often my experience: I've got a tiny bit of faith in a certain circumstance – Lord water it, help it to grow, help me to have more faith in you in my circumstances.

Jesus worked with the limited expectations of this man. And so we find here in this passage it's an age old problem Jesus was dealing with here, because the question that comes to mind is (and it's a question that Anna mentioned when she was talking about the question she'd like to ask of God when she meets him) that question of: why are some people born with disabilities, and why do

other people develop them for no apparent reason? And the fact is that down through human history it's often been argued, sadly often by religious people, that disabled people somehow deserve their disability; and I'd like to say to you that that is a wicked, wicked lie. Because the reality is that everyone of us, as we said earlier, has degrees of ability and therefore degrees of disability – if not now then at some future point in our lives. And, of course, everyone who was healed by the Lord would have gone on to have other disabilities during their life, and would have the final disability of coming to the end of their life.

Jesus completely rejects this idea that those with disabilities somehow deserve it. And if we were to look further in John, to John chapter 9, the first three verses, we read there a clear statement by Jesus on this point. John 9:1-3 says: “As he went along, he saw a man blind from birth. His disciples asked him, ‘Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?’ Jesus replied, ‘Neither this man nor his parents sinned, but this happened so that the work of God might be displayed in his life.’” Amen!

So the abilities, and the lack of ability that each one of us have in our lives is an opportunity for the glory, and the goodness, and the blessing of God, to be shown in our lives. And that doesn't mean simply by God taking away those disabilities but that God shows his grace through us as we live with them, and as we show that we actually are not going to be defined by our ability or our disabilities – rather we are going to live in the grace of God knowing his goodness in our circumstances.

This man in today's passage did not have a disability because he had something wrong, nor was he healed because he did something right! It's interesting if we notice around that pool there were many people waiting for the stirring of the water and what Jesus didn't do was walk around the pool bringing healing to all of the people, or even walking past some and bringing healing to others; Jesus went to the one person that the Spirit of God led him to. But he didn't go away feeling guilty about: “What about of those other people I didn't go and speak to?” Because Jesus knew that people's ability, or disability, was not to define the degree by which they were loved by God – that actually being loved by God is the essence of who we are, not the essence of our ability or disability.

Suffering and disability do not, let me say that again, **do not** come from God – God is a God of love and a God of goodness. But I do believe that in this sinful fallen world (as Anna referred to earlier) the reality is sickness and pain is a part of reality in this world. And on occasions in today's world God does still bring healing; but on occasions God also does not bring physical healing. And it's important to acknowledge that, otherwise we get into this whole thing of “well if I was a better person, God would heal me” and I do not believe that is true. We cannot give a formula for why healing comes to some people and not to others.

Many times God chooses to work through suffering and pain rather than removing it. In Romans 8:18-19 we discover these words that Paul wrote: “I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us. The creation waits in eager expectation for the sons and daughters of God to be revealed.” In other words the suffering, the human physical suffering, and emotional suffering, and even spiritual suffering, that we have in this world will pale into insignificance in comparison with the glory that is found in God that one day we will see and experience when we meet God face to face. The supreme example of this, of course, is Jesus himself because through, not despite the crucifixion but through, the crucifixion that he suffered he brought us life. He himself was raised from the dead and enables us to experience resurrection in our lives, in our reality.

Finally, we have this universal truth: this universal truth that all human beings whatever their ability, or disability, we are each made in the image of God. Jesus not only responded to the man's physical needs but is inner needs as well – his inner spiritual needs – and so we have that interesting little comment at the end when the man discovers it was Jesus who healed him: Jesus went back to him and said, “See you are well again. Stop sinning or something worse may happen to you!” Now what was that worse thing that Jesus was saying might happen? Well you may be separated from the love of God if you choose to continue to live in a way that is offensive to God.

So he's saying your physical disability is not the biggest issue – the biggest issue is having a relationship with God. Seek to love and serve God in your life; and he says that to a person with abilities, and with disabilities, as each one of us has. Our attitude to those who are differently abled to ourselves will only be Christlike when we treat them and everyone else as whole people – as whole people, not simply labelling people as this or as that. Seeing a person, not a problem; offering access, not obstacles; enabling talents, not encouraging embarrassment and sentimentality.

There was a 20<sup>th</sup> century poet by the name of Paul Claudel and I just want to give you a statement that he made. He said: “Jesus did not come to explain suffering or to take it away, he came to fill it with his presence.” Jesus didn't come to explain suffering or to take it away, he came to fill it with his presence. Let's pray together.

Lord God we just pray in this moment as we reflect on this issue that has been around since the beginning of human history, this issue of pain and suffering; how can you be a good God if you allow pain and suffering in this world? And we reflect, Lord God, that whether we suffer as we each do suffer pain and suffering in different ways in our lives, this is not a reflection of your love, or lack of love, for us, rather you want us to learn through the experiences, the so often painful experiences of our lives, not to rely on our feelings but to recognise that you, Lord God, are alongside us in every circumstance of life and if we have even a tiny modicum of faith that you, Lord God, will help that faith to grow and that we can learn to be more Christlike in how we respond to all the circumstances of our lives. We pray, Lord God, that you'll continue to do that work of grace in our hearts, in our lives as we inevitably come up against difficult circumstances in our daily lives. In your name we pray things, Lord Jesus. Amen.

Amen.