

## **Stand up and Walk**

### **John 5:1-9**

I wonder how Jesus spoke those words. Did he speak to him in a very matter-of-fact manner: 'do you want to be made well?' Or with a sense of amazement: 'do you want to be made well?' All the sense of anger and frustration: 'do you want to be made well?' And I wonder how the sick man replied. With anger? 'Of course I do!' Was a bit of a whinge? 'I have no want to help me.' It is not obvious from what John writes. But we do know the outcome: but once the man was made well and he took up his mat and began to walk.

The language is very matter of fact, extraordinarily understated. But the outcome really is dramatic: a man who has been unable to walk for thirty eight years walks again. What can possibly bring this about?

This is not a stereotypical healing. The sick man does not approach Jesus. He doesn't express any kind of faith in Jesus. And Jesus does not respond to the sick man's complaint. It is just possible that his assertion that he has failed for thirty eight years to find healing because no one will help him to the water is true. In which case Jesus might have said 'let me help you down to the waters'. But that is not Jesus's response. Jesus simply gives him an instruction: 'stand up, take your mat and walk.' But perhaps it is more than instruction. Perhaps it is more of a challenge: 'you will walk!'

And the sick man does! He takes many steps in the literal meaning of the word. But in a spiritual sense he has taken just one step, but a very important step. He has discovered what he wants and, through the power of Jesus of Nazareth, he has claimed it. He has ceased to think of himself as being totally dependent upon others and has begun to live actively.

It would of course be totally inappropriate to generalise from this one instance. It would be utterly ridiculous to claim that anyone who is unable to walk we will be able to do so if only they decide they want to do it. It would be insulting. But it will be just as wrong to go to the other extreme and to

claim that this particular sick man is quite simply a unique case. It would be quite untrue to say that there is nobody else like this sick man.

It is quite possible that there are people whose lives are dominated by a conviction that the only life possible for them is one of dependence, complete passivity. Perhaps you know people like that. But I do not want to focus upon them today because the truth is it is always easier to find faults in other people. It is always easy to volunteer to take a speck of dust out of another persons eye while being quite oblivious of the plank of wood in my own. I want to focus on me and you. My reluctance to be healed, to be independent, is not as dramatic as that of the man in today's gospel story. I have not sat paralysed by a pool of water for thirty eight years waiting for somebody to pick me up. At least not in any literal sense.

But I know that I have a tendency to give up. I know that I have a tendency to find reasons why I will fail rather than to seek success. And this is a spiritual matter. This is the sin of despair. We have, fortunately left behind that age when attempted suicide was, in itself, regarded as a sin. We no longer refuse Christian funerals to those who have succeeded in committing suicide. That is a great sign of progress. But I am sure it remains true that the deliberate fostering of despair is a sin, in the sense that it is erecting a barrier between me and God.

In subtle and hidden ways I sit by the water and lament that there is nobody to carry me into it. And I know this because I know, that for me, coming to faith was about renouncing despair, it was about giving up an attitude that saw my glass being half empty and consciously taking on an attitude that my glass is half full. That does not mean that I don't revert to seeing my glass being half empty: I do! But I know that when I do it I am stepping back from putting my faith in Christ. And I respond by consciously taking a decision of faith to trust him again. So I, at a personal level relates to the spiritual step taken by the man who lay by the pool.

So what about you? What is there in your life, in your attitude to life, that denies the power of Christ? What is there in you that pushes away the power of Christ, that does not want it in your life? Perhaps only you know. Or perhaps you don't know. In which case you need the guidance of the

Holy Spirit to reveal it to you. Every time I have spoken since Easter Sunday I have referred to this picture of steps. It is particularly appropriate to today's gospel story, to a man who with a few literal steps took a very large spiritual step.

So what step is God calling you to take? I would ask you to give some serious thought to that. I would ask you to use the time between Ascension and Pentecost to ask the Holy Spirit to show you what is the next stage in your journey with Christ. To show you what holds you back from taking that step. And to ask the grace of that same Spirit to enable you to step forward.

On the Feast of Pentecost, June 9th, there will be an opportunity for you to be anointed with the oil of chrism, the oil that is used for the anointing of kings and queens, the oil that is used for the anointing of those who are ordained priest, the oil that is used for those who are confirmed with the Holy Spirit. You may wish to be anointed with that oil to remind you that you are chosen by God. You may wish to be anointed with the oil of chrism to strengthen you as you take your next step in faith.

But I would encourage you to know what that step is. It may well be that what you need in your life is the fruit of the Spirit, and perhaps one fruit in particular. ST Paul in his letter to the Galatians lists the fruits of the Spirit as

love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity,  
faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Galatians 5:22

In writing to the Corinthians, Paul describes love as being

'patient, kind, ready to make allowances, trustful, hopeful and willing to endure whatever comes.'

1 Cor 13:6-7

Peter in his second letter lists

'faith, goodness, understanding, self-control, perseverance, devotion, kindness, and love.'

2 Peter 1:5-7

Or it may be that there is some aspects of service you wish to commit yourself to do in the world. It may be something very simple like talking to someone you find difficult, or visiting around a relative or neighbour you are not particularly fond of, or have very little time for. Or it may be an act of service within the church. Whether your service is in the world or the church, it will involve your time and your talents.

And then there is always your treasure. You may wish to consider how much of your regular income you give back to God. Would you do it as a fixed amount, measured in pounds? Would you do it as a fixed percentage, of a proportion of your income? Remember that God is not the same as the church. The kingdom of God is the whole world. But within the decision about how much of your treasure you will give to God, you might like to consider how much you give to the church and in particular the work of this congregation. And each one of us needs to remember that the only people who are committed to supporting the work of this church are those of us who sit here Sunday by Sunday. There is no-one else!

So you have a form to fill it in. There is nobody you need to give this form to. The form is for nobody else to read. The form is entirely between you and God. But please take the time between now and Pentecost Sunday to complete it. Consider your own attitudes and decide which of the fruits of the Spirit you want God's Holy Spirit to grow in you. Consider what your time and talents are and decide how you are called to use them in the service of God both in the world and within the church. Consider what your treasure is and how you want to use it in the service of God both in the world and in the church. And then on Pentecost Sunday you might like to offer yourself to God and to ask for his power through anointing in holy oil to enable you to do what you are called to do.

Each one of us has our own way of choosing dependence, and passivity. Your way will not be on my way but a question that Jesus puts to each one of us is exactly the same: 'do you want to be made well?' And the commandment that Jesus gives to everyone of us is exactly the same as well: 'Stand up! Walk!' Each one of us, in our own way, is called to share in the building of the Kingdom of God.

N Clews 25th May 2019