

Christ is risen!

There are three points which I would like to look at more closely in today's Gospel reading (John 5:1-15). The first is the place at which this healing occurs. The Pool of Bethesda, near the Sheep Gate of Jerusalem, was, we are told, noted as a healing site. Every so often the water would unexpectedly bubble up, and the belief was that this denoted a supernatural intervention, and that the first person to be able to get into the water after this bubbling up would be healed. The remains of the pool were discovered in the 19th century, and although the site is not easy to interpret it can be seen today by anyone who makes the pilgrimage to Jerusalem.

St John's Gospel tells us that the pool had five porticoes, and this can be seen in the archaeological remains – the complex at the time of Jesus seems to have consisted of two pools surrounded by a colonnade, with a further colonnade dividing them. But as we should remember when reading St John, his interest in numbers is more in their symbolism than in architectural description. We have a man, sick and unable to be healed, lying in this fivefold structure. Our minds should immediately go to the most famous fivefold feature of Jesus' time: the Torah, the Jewish Law, found in the five books of Moses. Scholars are divided as to whether at this time the Pool of Bethesda was a *mikveh*, a Jewish bath for ritual cleansing, or part of a pagan healing complex (an *asclepion*). The detail of the five porches, given St John's interest in numerical symbols, may incline us to think that he favoured the former understanding, but one way or the other it is clear that this man is in the wrong place.

Then there is the length of time mentioned. The man has been suffering for 38 years – longer, probably, than Jesus' earthly lifetime. It takes no great effort to realise that he would be fairly well known to the locals – part of the furniture of the pool, almost. The miracle of his healing would be something that would surely attract their attention. But once more we should note the symbolic dimension of the number. "Thirty-eight years" appears only once elsewhere in the whole of the Bible, in Deuteronomy 2:14. There we are told that the wilderness journey of the Israelites in their Exodus from Egypt to the Promised Land took 38 years, the time taken for the old generation (which had refused to exercise trust in God) to pass, and for a new generation to take their place.

Putting these two points together we can see that under the surface of the story St John is inviting us to read a more universal message of healing and salvation. The man who is to be healed is to be freed from the world of the Law and after going through the equivalent time to the Exodus is to enter the Land of Promise. It is telling in this context that the first thing that Jesus tells him to do is to break the Law ("pick up your mattress and carry it away" on the Sabbath day).

But here is the third point. The whole story of healing turns on the man's response to Jesus' question: "Do you want to be healed?" In his paralysed, law-bound life he may have become accustomed to the way things were. He might not be exactly comfortable, but he knew how to manage. He might complain that he couldn't be healed, but illness might be his security. Against this comes the challenge of Jesus: to move out into the new world of the New Commandment (John 13:34; 15:12; 15:17 – a threefold repetition!), to follow the New

Joshua/Jesus into the Land of Promise. “Do you want to be healed?” is therefore not simply a question about a change from sick to well. It reaches deep into the soul. “Are you willing to trust yourself to my guidance in opening up before you the new full life which I can give? Are you willing to take the step of faith on that path?”

St John, in his Gospel, doesn't use the word “miracle”. He gives us instead seven “signs” which, as signs do, point beyond themselves to something greater. These signs are fulfilled in the great Eighth Day of the Resurrection in the light of which they all become clear. As we live this Life, especially in this Easter period, the Church challenges us to understand more clearly what it is these signs point to, and to face for ourselves the same challenge. “Do you really want this life, this love, this grace?”

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