

We are working our way through John's gospel and, today, we come to this story of Jesus healing a man who had been sick for 38 years. Over the past few weeks we've seen that John is particularly concerned with signs, and unfolding the story of who Jesus is. He has written in such a way that there are clues, or signs, in what Jesus says or, in this case, in what he does. He tells us - *Jesus performed many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.* John 20:30-31

(Encourage reading)

The pool at Bethesda was a well-known place of healing. It is in Jerusalem itself, just north of the Temple Mount area. The area has been excavated and you can go and see it for yourself. It was not just a Jewish site though as, at one stage, it was dedicated to the pagan god Asclepius, who was also associated with healing. The observant among you might have noticed that there was no verse 4 in the reading. We went straight from 3-5. Some ancient copies have an extra verse there which explains that at different times the water bubbled up and that the first person into the pool at that time would be healed. We don't have that because the most reliable early versions don't include it.

Clearly it was a system that didn't really work. Could it be that the man had simply made a way of life there, resigned to the fact that other people were always going to get there first. We don't know where he was lying, but I would have been right on the edge of the pool! Perhaps Jesus' question was more pointed than it appears – do you *really* want to get better, or are you now quite happy eking out your days here? How sad to be in a place that speaks of the possibility of the miraculous but never being able to experience it. We need to pray that this place is never like that – if we're talking about new life, then we need to make sure we, and others, are experiencing it.

Then Jesus comes along and does what the pool couldn't do. Just like the official's son last week all it takes is a word of command and the man is healed. We're not even told that he believed, although he must have done or he wouldn't have got up! He now finds himself launched on the much harder, but more satisfying, way of life that goes with being whole. He won't be able to rely on charity now – he's going to have to find somewhere to live and somewhere to work.

I think there is a lesson here. Sometimes we give the impression that being a Christian is so wonderful that you never have any problems, but that is simply not true. It can sometimes mean changing jobs, changing friends or changing habits from things are not good for you. If God is for us.....

John loves to show how Jesus fulfils the hopes and longings of the Jewish people, and here, he seems to imply that Jesus also fulfils the hopes and half-formed beliefs of the pagan world. Part of the point that John is making is that if salvation is of the Jews, and Jesus is now bringing that salvation, it must spread out from the Jews to the wider world. The pagan shrine points to the healing that Jesus brings into the world.

Paganism looks at the created world and tries to harness forces within it for its own ends – crystal healers; ley lines etc. The healing that Jesus brings is the reality the created world was waiting for, the beginning of new creation. He salvation that Jesus brings when he comes into the world is the new day that, had they but realised it, Israel and the whole earth had been waiting for.

In view of the rest of the chapter verse 8 gives us a hint of what that new creation will look like. The word Jesus uses which is translated 'Get up' is the word generally used in the New Testament to describe the resurrection. Here's part of the secret – Jesus isn't trying to use force within the existing creation to put right something that has gone wrong within that creation – he's bringing new life, a new creation and it bursts through into the present world, bringing healing and new possibilities. No wonder they found it disturbing! In a way that's why we have set aside a place for prayer. I believe that God, by the Holy Spirit, still bursts through what we consider 'normal' and brings new life and new creation power. That's why we pray for healing, or wisdom, peace, blessing. When we used the Try Praying books a few months ago a couple of people told me that things had changed because they had been praying. So, I want to encourage you to come

and join me in learning to pray for other people so that you can be blessed, and other people can be blessed through you.

The word sign doesn't appear in this passage, but the sign is there for people who look for it, and by now John expects us to find them for ourselves.

In the second part of the passage it seems as if Jesus and the Judeans are working in two different time zones – theological time zones that is. The issue concerns the Sabbath and in the Old Testament one of its original purposes was to highlight the seventh day, when the creator rested. Week by week the law-abiding Jews kept a strict day without work – and they defined work very carefully so that there would be no doubt. Jesus seems to have continued to do things on the Sabbath that his enemies frequently understood to be work. Here John makes sure we understand that this was an issue because he is starting to set up the thought of opposition to Jesus, and giving a reason for it. Jesus didn't have to heal the man that day. He'd waited nearly forty years and another day surely wouldn't have made a difference. But Jesus seems to have chosen that particular day, and although what Jesus did could hardly be considered work, what he told the man to do – to carry his mat – absolutely was work.

Jesus' explanation was that he was living in a different time zone. His father was at work, and he was being obedient in doing the work his father gave him.

The heart of the argument seems to be that Jesus believed that the Father was in the process of launching the New Creation, and this somehow superseded the old one. God was healing the sorry, sick old world, and though there may come time for rest it was, at that moment, time for the work of new creation to go forward.

Of course, the Judeans understood the signs better than we do, and it is obvious that they would not be happy. The Judeans were the inhabitants of the southern part of the country and, in ch 7 John spells out that it was the Jews who live in Judea as opposed to Galilee. John is setting up the start of the violent opposition to Jesus, centred in Jerusalem itself.

If Jesus' work of healing and new creation was going forward, what was holding it up? Not just opposition, but sin. This is difficult because Jesus implies that this man had got himself into that situation because of his own sin John 5:4 *Later Jesus found him at the temple and said to him, 'See, you are well again. Stop sinning or something worse may happen to you.'*

However, four chapters later, Jesus says that the condition of the man born blind had nothing to do with anyone's sin. It seems that some sicknesses may be related to some sins, but you shouldn't deduce the one from the other.

We see, in this story, the expansion and outworking of the prologue in chapter 1:10-11 *He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognise him. <sup>11</sup> He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him.*

They were not ready for new creation, for the living Word of God to come to them with new things to say. They were living in the old time zone, and were angry with Jesus for, as it were, waking them up too soon. This battle of the time zones will continue until it reaches its climax at Calvary.

It is a battle that continues today. With the resurrection, God's new creation project is launched on the whole earth. People still react angrily to it and there is still opposition. So, we need to be followers of Jesus who say, "Jesus is at work, and so am I!"