

Wednesday Worship—People Jesus Met

19th August 2020

The Man at the Pool of Bethesda

Opening prayers

God in Christ has revealed his glory.
All **Come let us worship.**

From the rising of the sun to its setting
All **the Lord's name is greatly to be praised.**

Give him praise, you servants of the Lord.
All **O praise the name of the Lord!**

Faithful one, whose word is life:
come with saving power
to free our praise,
inspire our prayer
and shape our lives
for the kingdom of your Son,
Jesus Christ our Lord.
All **Amen.**

Introduction

In this fifth service in our series on 'People Jesus Met' Jesus meets a man in need at the Pool of Bethesda. He'd been suffering for a long time and called out to Jesus. Interestingly, Jesus first asks him if he wants to be healed—not pushing his help but giving it when wanted. However, in healing the man he upsets some people who are more concerned with the Sabbath rules than with compassion and mercy.

Hymn: *Thou, whose almighty word*

Prayers with lighting of a candle

Christ, as a light
Illumine and guide us.
Christ, as a shield
overshadow us.
Christ under us;
Christ over us;
Christ beside us
on our left and our right.
This day be within and without us,
lowly and meek, yet all-powerful.
Be in the heart of each to whom we speak;
in the mouth of each who speaks unto us.
This day be within and without us,

lowly and meek, yet all-powerful.
Christ as a light;
Christ as a shield;
Christ beside us
on our left and our right.

All **Amen.**

Ist Reading: Jonah 2.2-9

I called to the Lord out of my distress,
and he answered me;
out of the belly of Sheol I cried,
and you heard my voice.
You cast me into the deep,
into the heart of the seas,
and the flood surrounded me;
all your waves and your billows
passed over me.
Then I said, "I am driven away
from your sight;
how shall I look again
upon your holy temple?"
The waters closed in over me;
the deep surrounded me;
weeds were wrapped around my head
at the roots of the mountains.
I went down to the land
whose bars closed upon me for ever;
yet you brought up my life from the Pit,
O Lord my God.
As my life was ebbing away,
I remembered the Lord;
and my prayer came to you,
into your holy temple.
Those who worship vain idols
forsake their true loyalty.
But I with the voice of thanksgiving
will sacrifice to you;
what I have vowed I will pay.
Deliverance belongs to the Lord!

Prayer of response

Lord, in times of trouble
help us to remember to turn to you,
knowing that you will hear our call
even in the darkest of places.

All **Amen.**

Psalm 41

Happy are those who consider the poor;
the LORD delivers them in the day of trouble.
The LORD protects them and keeps them alive;
they are called happy in the land.
You do not give them up to the will of their enemies.
The LORD sustains them on their sickbed;
in their illness you heal all their infirmities.

As for me, I said, 'O LORD, be gracious to me;
heal me, for I have sinned against you.'
My enemies wonder in malice
when I will die, and my name perish.
And when they come to see me, they utter empty words,
while their hearts gather mischief;
when they go out, they tell it abroad.
All who hate me whisper together about me;
they imagine the worst for me.

They think that a deadly thing has fastened on me,
that I will not rise again from where I lie.
Even my bosom friend in whom I trusted,
who ate of my bread, has lifted the heel against me.
But you, O LORD, be gracious to me,
and raise me up, that I may repay them.

By this I know that you are pleased with me;
because my enemy has not triumphed over me.
But you have upheld me because of my integrity,
and set me in your presence for ever.

Blessed be the LORD, the God of Israel,
from everlasting to everlasting. Amen and Amen.

Prayer of response

God our deliverer,
raise up the poor,
help the sick
and comfort the betrayed,
through the one who for our sakes became poor
and whose betrayal brought our salvation,
Jesus Christ our Lord.

All **Amen.**

2nd Reading: James 5.7-14

Be patient, therefore, beloved, until the coming of the Lord. The farmer waits for the precious crop from the earth, being patient with it until it receives the early and the late rains. You also must be patient. Strengthen your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is near. Beloved, do not grumble against one another, so that you may not be judged. See, the Judge is standing at the doors! As an example of suffering and patience, beloved, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord. Indeed we call blessed those who showed endurance. You have heard of the endurance of Job, and you have seen the purpose of the Lord, how the Lord is compassionate and merciful.

Above all, my beloved, do not swear, either by heaven or by earth or by any other oath, but let your 'Yes' be yes and your 'No' be no, so that you may not fall under condemnation.

Are any among you suffering? They should pray. Are any cheerful? They should sing songs of praise. Are any among you sick? They should call for the elders of the church and have them pray over them, anointing them with oil in the name of the Lord.

Prayer of response

Lord, give us patience
to wait for you when times are hard
and help seems slow in coming.
May we be consoled by your goodness
and find comfort under your wings.

All **Amen.**

3rd Reading: John 5.1-18

After this there was a festival of the Jews, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem.

Now in Jerusalem by the Sheep Gate there is a pool, called in Hebrew Beth-zatha, which has five porticoes. In these lay many invalids—blind, lame, and paralysed. One man was there who had been ill for thirty-eight years. When Jesus saw him lying there and knew that he had been there a long time, he said to him, 'Do you want to be made well?' The sick man answered him, 'Sir, I have no one to put me into the pool when the water is stirred up; and while I am making my way, someone else steps down ahead of me.' Jesus said to him, 'Stand up, take your mat and walk.' At once the man was made well, and he took up his mat and began to walk.

Now that day was a sabbath. So the Jews said to the man who had been cured, 'It is the sabbath; it is not lawful for you to carry your mat.' But he answered them, 'The man who made me well said to me, "Take up your mat and walk." ' They asked him, 'Who is the man who said to you, "Take it up and walk"?' Now the man who had been healed did not know who it was, for Jesus had disappeared in the crowd that was there. Later Jesus found him in the temple and said to him, 'See, you have been made well! Do not sin any more, so that nothing worse happens to you.' The man went away and told the Jews that it was Jesus who had made him well. Therefore the Jews started persecuting Jesus, because he was doing such things on the sabbath. But Jesus answered them, 'My Father is still working, and I also am working.' For this reason the Jews were seeking all the more to kill him, because he was not only breaking the sabbath, but was also calling God his own Father, thereby making himself equal to God.

Prayer of response

Lord our God,
sometimes we wonder why some are healed and some not.
Comfort us in sorrow and confusion
and help us to remember that when we weep
you weep with us.

All **Amen.**

Hymn: Lord of the dance

Reflection

The man healed in this story is perhaps the least willing and the least grateful of all the people Jesus heals in John's Gospel.

Jesus encounters this man at a pool called Bethzatha or Bethesda near the Sheep's Gate in Jerusalem. People would sit there waiting for an angel to come and stir up the waters in the belief that when this happened the water could heal them. When Jesus sees a man who has been ill for thirty-eight years lying there, he asks him, "Do you want to be made well?". We might expect a resounding "Yes!". Instead, the man complains that no-one will help him into the water.

Now, it might seem strange for Jesus to ask this question, but it isn't entirely. Harsh though it sounds, I have come across people who would rather complain about their problems than do anything to solve them. This isn't necessarily deliberate or done for bad motives. Things can happen in our lives to make us feel helpless, like we can do nothing to help ourselves. On the other hand, ill or needy can become part of our identity. We can become scared that they we won't know who we are without it or that we might not be noticed any more if we have nothing to complain about.

So, Jesus asks this question and the man comes up with his excuse. He claims that in 38 years no-one has been able to help him into the pool. This seems unlikely. Surely, in nearly 4 decades, someone would've been moved to help him if he'd asked. Had he asked, or had he just grumbled to himself? Is this why Jesus questioned him about whether he wanted to be healed?

But, regardless of all that, Jesus heals him, and the man immediately takes up his mat and walks. However, the man doesn't show much gratitude. In fact, he doesn't even stop to find out who Jesus is but just walks off. So, when he's stopped for carrying his mat on the Sabbath, which breaks the law against working, he can't give a name to the authorities.

Later, Jesus finds the man and warns him against sinning, and the man goes straight to the authorities to tell them who healed him, leading to persecution of Jesus for healing on the Sabbath.

The hostile Jewish authorities, who are the ones John means when he talks about “the Jews”, are convinced that Jesus is a sinner because he heals on the Sabbath. The real sin here, though, is unbelief; it is rejection of the One sent by God. When Jesus meets the healed man in the temple, he tells him, “See, you have been made well! Do not sin anymore, so that nothing worse happens to you”.

Unbelief is the sin that Jesus warns the man against. There are worse things than being told off for breaking the Sabbath. If the man persists in his unbelief and indifference to Jesus, he risks the judgement of God, which matters far more than that of the religious authorities.

The man, though made well, seems blind to the power and presence of God in Jesus and more worried about keeping on the good side of those in positions of earthly power. The good that Jesus does is met not with faith or gratitude, but with persecution. Yet Jesus continues doing the life-giving work of his Father, regardless of the consequences.

We might wonder why Jesus chose this man to heal out of all the invalids lying around the pool of Bethzatha. Surely there were more deserving people, or why not heal them all?

Yet here we see that the compassion and healing power of Jesus are not reserved only for those who are “deserving” -- for those whose faith is great and who respond to healing by believing in and following Jesus.

Certainly, Jesus heals them too. But here Jesus heals someone whose lack of faith leads him to cooperate with those who persecute and try to kill him.

Nice though it would be, John’s Gospel does not answer the question of why certain people are healed and others are not, or indeed why people fall ill or suffer, a question that’s particularly pressing during this pandemic.

But this passage makes it clear that healing is not a matter of having “enough” faith (as if that could be measured). Neither is disease, infirmity or disaster a matter of who has sinned and who hasn’t. Jesus makes that clear in Luke 13, when he says of people killed by a tower falling on them that they weren’t worse sinners than anyone else.

We don’t know entirely how God works, and why he chooses to intervene in one situation and not another, but we do know that God doesn’t discriminate. He’s willing to give good gifts to those who ask, regardless of how deserving they are, because he wills that all may have life and have it abundantly.

The question is, do we believe and are we willing to ask? And if we get what we ask for will we recognise God’s hand in it? Jesus doesn’t heal to get gratitude or praise or devotion. He heals people simply because this is the work of his Father. But we are called to see and believe, to recognise God at work in the world, and to persevere through difficulties, knowing that one day help will come.

Intercessions

In the waiting and the watching,
in the longing for healing and the hope of a touch,
in the loneliness and hopelessness,
in the anxiety and depression,
at the bedsides of the world.

All **Loving God, draw close.**

Linger with all who hurt and suffer,
that they may know your healing touch
in all its power and mystery.
Linger with all who work and care where sickness is,
that they may know your gentle strength
in all its humility and grace.

All **Loving God, draw close.**

Linger with all whose jobs are lost or in danger,
that they may find security in you.
Linger with those who make policy and affect livelihoods,
that they may know your compassion and care.

All **Loving God, draw close.**

Linger with those who lead nations and peoples,
that they may see your justice and mercy,
and follow in your ways.
Linger with those forced to flee their homes,
in fear of war or persecution,
or to escape natural disaster,
that they may find you walking with them.

All **Loving God, draw close.**

In sorrow and confusion,
in joy and understanding,
may we always find you with us, O Lord.

All **Loving God, draw close.**

Trusting in the compassion of God,
we pray with confidence as our Saviour has taught us.
All **Our Father, who art in heaven...**

Hymn: Crown him with many crowns

Closing prayers

In darkness and in light,
in trouble and in joy,
help us, heavenly Father,
to trust your love,
to serve your purpose,
and to praise your name;
through Jesus Christ our Lord.

All **Amen.**

May the peace of the Lord Christ go with us,
wherever he may send us.
May he guide us through the wilderness,
protect us through the storm.
May he bring us home rejoicing
at the wonders he has shown us.
May he bring us home rejoicing
once again into our doors.

All **Amen.**

Glory to God,
whose power, at work among us,
can do infinitely more
than all we can ask or conceive;
to him be glory in the Church and in Christ Jesus,
for ever and ever.

All **Amen.**