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Healing : Steps toward Wholeness

(John 5, 1-15)

1. The Gospel Story : John 5, 1-15

A.

The Pool of Bethesda is still there, or was in 1985, though in ruins. In the time of Jesus it was reputed to have magic healing waters – when the water bubbled up from the well beneath, it was widely believed the first person in would be healed.

This man had been disabled for 38 years – 'crippled', he couldn't walk. Where did he live? Was he every day at the pool? Did someone bring him? Did they bring him food? We don't know, but he had no-one who could help him into the unpredictable water. Jesus came there on a sabbath day. Among the crowds of sick and disabled people, he noticed this man. I wonder what picked him out?

Jesus understood his dilemma, but he also knew that people can become wedded to their disabled life-style, however unpleasant it appears. It can be challenging to change. Jesus asked him: "*Do you want to recover?*" The man did not know him, but it seems that he saw something about Jesus that was different, that alerted him, that warned him that this was no idle enquiry. This might be important, momentous even. As so often with those faced with Jesus in the gospel stories, he was forced to be honest, to search inside himself for the truth; could he face an utterly new life-style? Dare he respond and trust Jesus?

We only have the briefest of summaries of this encounter, just a few printed words. We have no inflections, no emphases. We see no smiles or frowns, no gestures, no subtle body language. We hear no pauses, no change of breathing. I guess that Jesus understood his answer more in his face, in his eyes, than in any words – we only have an implied "Yes". And Jesus is sufficient; he does nothing but invite him to stand up. His presence is the healing agent. But that is not the end of the story.

B.

He stood, walked, and carried his bed – but it was the sabbath day! A pious Jew, possibly a pharisee, told him off for this disobedience to the law: "*Why do you do it?*" He replied: "*The man who healed me told me to*", but he did not know who that healer was. They wanted to know because Jesus was also party to breaking the law!

The man then went to the Temple; a pious act and one Jesus would approve of, if he were giving thanks to God for his recovery. They met there, and the man discovered who Jesus was and told the Jewish leaders. This healing on the sabbath angered them and set them against Jesus. But there is yet more in this story.

C.

We do not know what he said to Jesus in the temple; we can guess that he expressed his gratitude. But we do have recorded Jesus's reply: *"Now that you are well again, leave your sinful ways, or you may suffer something worse."*

In the somewhat parallel story in Luke 5, (17-26) where a crippled man is brought to Jesus by his friends, Jesus initially says *"Your sins are forgiven"* and suggests that, for that particular man, this is equivalent to saying *"Stand up, take your bed, and go home"*. Similarly, speaking to the man from Bethesda, Jesus specifically relates his disability to his sins! What sins, we wonder? Was his disability a pretence? an exaggeration? an avoidance of responsibilities? laziness? a choice of begging as an easy life?

We can't know, but, with a little thought, we might find in ourselves some degree of such attitudes, such behaviours. We may think of them as rather trivial sins, but they can significantly diminish who we are and what we can do with our lives, and they are not what God wants of us. We can move toward wholeness only as such things are conquered.

Perhaps we can now understand why Jesus selected this man from the crowd at Bethesda; he understood him, he had summed him up, recognised the true situation, the underlying problem. But he also recognised the potential of this man to see himself clearly and to change. Was he healed? Yes, but his healing was only one step toward wholeness. To progress further toward wholeness he needed to accept and to conquer his sins; his new way of life should be more than just walking. He needed both faith and faithfulness.

2. WB Yeats' play 'At the Hawk's Well' (1917)

The play tells an old Irish legend of a similar situation – similar legends are found in many folk traditions. An ancient well is dry but occasionally and without warning bubbles up with a little water. It is believed that if you can sip this water you will be healed of all ills and have eternal life. But the well has a Guardian, an attractive young girl in the form of a Hawk, who distracts those waiting so they miss the brief moment. An old man has been waiting over 50 years, but the Hawk still distracts him until he is drowsy. When he looks up the stones are damp and he has missed the water.

Young Prince Cuchulain arrives seeking eternal life, but is tempted away by the young girl, and also misses the water. They could only achieve what they seek by self discipline, resisting temptation and denying themselves. But if by chance they were healed of all ills, it would be only one step toward wholeness; they must also conquer their sins. They needed not only faith, but also faithfulness.

The metaphor is obvious; but the story in John's Gospel is explicit. Jesus brings the 'living water', the Spirit of God. He by-passes traditional beliefs, myths, superstitions, and brings healing and a different concept of eternal life. His presence is healing, but we need both faith and faithfulness to move toward wholeness.

3. John Donne's 'Devotions' (1623)

But healing from illness is not always like that. John Donne great English poet and Dean of St Paul's, was aged 53 when he was ill and thought he might be dying. He wrote meditations ('Devotions') each day upon his experience of illness. He was always very much aware of the reality of death for each of us. When he

heard a funeral bell softly tolling he gave us the famous passage "*No man is an island entire of itself, every man is a piece of the continent ... If a clod be washed away by the sea, Europe is the less ...; any man's death diminishes me because I am involved in mankind, and therefore never send to ask for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee.*"

On the first day, when he merely suspected that he might be ill, he noted our capacity for anxiety, anticipation, fear of illness, even before any serious symptoms or thoughts of dying: "*So that now, we do not only die, but die upon the rack ... before we can call it sickness, we are not sure that we are ill, one hand asks the other by the pulse, and our eye asks our own urine how we do. O multiplied misery! We die and cannot enjoy death.*" Dying was to go to our loving heavenly Father; we should be able to enjoy it!

As his illness developed he sent for a doctor (Day 4) but he had to reconcile this with the firm belief that God should be sufficient for him, that Jesus was the only physician he needed. His conclusion, closely argued as always, was developed from scripture. God had provided plants as medicines; God had called physicians to their profession and we should not reject the gifts of God. But, he wrote "*I send for the physician, but I will hear him enter with the words of Peter, 'Jesus Christ maketh thee whole' (Acts 9, 34); I long for the doctor's presence, but I look 'that the power of the Lord should be present to heal me' (Luke 5,17).* Doctor and Medicines were agents of God.

He recovered from this illness, but 8 years later was very ill again. He fulfilled a preaching appointment at St Paul's, confessed his sins, and returned home to die soon after, in joy and peace, aware of the healing presence of God.

Was John Donne healed? I think he was, though his illness got worse and he died of it. His awareness of the presence of God was healing. His trust in God was healing. His calm acceptance of the realities of this life was healing, not of his physical disease, but of all the mental and spiritual corollaries of illness. He had acknowledged his sins, his imperfections. Perhaps in death, and only in death, he achieved wholeness.

4. A man called Crimea

Last year, Barbara and I met a very remarkable man. He was playing the organ in a village chapel in Gloucestershire. His name is 'Crimea'. Born 54 years ago to a Roma family, he was abandoned after a few years because of his disabilities: he was a very strange and difficult child. He then had a terrible childhood, treated badly in many foster homes and children's homes.

His problems are many. He is autistic, (Asberger's Syndrome) so has serious difficulty in understanding and relating to people, and cannot easily cope with change. He has Tourette's Syndrome, a brain disorder, probably genetic, which produces sudden, random, unpredictable and uncontrollable speech and movements. Crimea currently suddenly shouts 'Lexi' or 'Calico' and tends to shoot an arm out or wring his hands. Associated with this, he has OCD (Obsessional Compulsive Disorder), and as a child, had ADHD (Attention Deficit Hyper-activity Disorder). He is almost blind now, with 5% sight in only one eye. For some of these things some treatments are helpful to control symptoms, but there is no cure.

He is very intelligent and musically gifted, playing organ and piano. He reads music well but has to memorise because of his sight. He composes and last year had two concerts of orchestral music. He writes poetry which movingly evokes his experience. His personal faith has helped him come to terms with his damaged inheritance and damaging history, and to accept himself as he is. He is angry about his past, as he should be, but bears no rancour. He lives in a tiny village where everyone knows him and he is accepted.

He was particularly grateful to have a doctor fully competent in both neurology and psychiatry. He appears to know everything about his disabilities, and is happy to explain them in conversation. With amazing insight he has taught himself to relate to people positively and engage in serious discussion (about the sermon for example, with which he disagreed!) and was the one who first greeted us at the chapel, where his contribution is highly valued.

We also were not much inspired by the sermon, but we were both moved and inspired by Crimea and came away feeling privileged to have met him. He is under treatment; is he being healed? I think he is. He still suffers from all the disabilities nature and society has inflicted, but has accepted himself as he is; has come to terms with his past; is contributing positively to his community, and is confident about his future, with the support of God's people, and his own faith. All these achievements are steps toward wholeness.

5. Some Conclusions

Healing is extremely complex and no-one fully understands how healing is mediated in the human person. We may be concerned with disease, illness, injury, disability, reactions to experience or the environment, or just abnormal signs such as high blood pressure. Mixed up with these are depression and despair, low self esteem and confidence, fears and anxieties, hurt and loss, anger and resentment, stress and exhaustion, and guilt.

Any of these may affect any of the others – we are single organisms, body, mind and spirit, so any part not functioning correctly will have effects on the whole, in ways often little understood. Healing any of these disorders may affect others, as John Donne, Crimea and the paralysed man brought to Jesus show. Any healing of any part is a step towards wholeness.

Treating illness is the simple part, though it is only recent in human history that we do this successfully on a large scale. Like John Donne, we should be thankful for the gift of technologies and medicines, those committed to creating them, and those who know how to use them. And for the persons called into Medicine and health care.

However, there are still many diseases that can't be treated with confidence, and as we get older, our illnesses tend to be more complex and intertwined with the inevitable gradual failure of our bodies and minds. We can't for ever keep death away. But even if our illnesses and disabilities are not readily treated, there are so many other ways in which we can experience healing. And healing can be ministered to us by any of the people we live with and amongst. We can all be healers to others, helping them to take another step towards wholeness.

The man at Bethesda was healed of his disability, but could only progress to wholeness if he followed Jesus's advice to deal with his sins; faith and faithfulness.

John Donne died of his serious illness, but he was being healed and becoming whole by living with discipline, serving others to the last, accepting death, and making his peace with his fellows and with God; faith and faithfulness.

Crimea still suffers all the disabilities he was born with, but he engages with life, accepting what cannot be changed, and using all his positive gifts to the full. He experiences healing and grows toward wholeness; faith and faithfulness.

Every healing is a step, but only a step, toward wholeness.