

## An Untimely Therapist

I would like to make my own observations on the theme of this conference on *The Science and Art of Medicine*, under the title already chosen by Dietrich, 'An Untimely Therapist'.

For this purpose I have chosen the text from John 5, 1-18:

### The Healing at the Pool of Bethesda

This event has continued to engage and move me since my own personal neurological problems. This is probably because, since these problems, I have felt particularly close to this man, who is afflicted with chronic limitation in his ability to move. At some point, a good few months after my two brain haemorrhages and an operation on my cavernoma (on 19.9.2006), I first became aware in my reading that this poor man had already been sick for 38 years at the time he met Jesus for the first time. (As a fellow-sufferer, *I myself* was shocked by this). Jesus Christ knew of his long-term illness, and perhaps that is the reason he paid wholly personal attention to him. In his great art of healing, he comes across to me as a perfectly empathetic, wise therapist for body and soul. It is, for us, the inexplicable science and individual art of medicine simultaneously – original, overpowering, personal and mostly unexpected.

Like many others, Jesus is on his way to a major festival in Jerusalem. (We are not told which festival. It isn't relevant to the story). But we don't find him at the place where most others are gathering. Rather, he is drawn to a special place in the city. To the place where many chronically sick people wait near the pool of Bethesda (= the house of compassion) for the waters to stir. They are waiting for THEIR unique chance to be the *first* to bathe in the waters, to be healed immediately *following* what is regarded as a supernatural event. So people here believe they can only be cured through personal effort, through their own initiative, or with the help of another person, but not primarily by God. For to be healed, I must make my own significant contribution...

We first read that Jesus takes himself to this place of collective misery. The *sick* there interest him. They will certainly have already made great efforts to achieve a cure, have spent a lot of money, including on obscure remedies. The narration of the event tells us that, hitherto, none of this has done any good. All that remains is their hope in a miracle.

Jesus has a short therapeutic conversation with the sick man he is interested in; this goes straight to the nub of the problem. The man has already been, as we mentioned, an invalid for 38 years; he lives from the alms fellow compassionate people bring him. This is how I imagine him to be: twisted, his limbs and torso stiff, bent double, he lies there, chronically paralysed. He can only turn to respond to Jesus' question: "Do you want to get well?" with great effort. Given his situation, he would have to get up in haste, and if need be to limp more quickly than the other sick people to the water, if he was to be cured. But *in his case* that is *impossible* without continuous and significant assistance. Most of the other sick people, invalids, *always* get there before he does.

I know this situation well! How often have I too had similar experiences in the past! I can get to my particular destination as quickly as others on my recumbent bicycle. However, they, my healthier fellows, get what they want before me, for example, the attention of a shop assistant on a Saturday morning ... That discourages you, makes you feel small, ill, sad, and takes away any hope of making progress in the truest sense of the word.

Yet, last year, during our MdP conference in Montmirail, I was able, with some kind and attentive female helpers and a strong male assistant, to take a wonderfully refreshing bathe in the pool near our accommodation! Many, many thanks once more for all of your invaluable physical support without which it could not have happened!

However, the paralysed patient didn't have a *single* kind and attentive helper, nor any aids to support him in getting to the water when it was stirred! Whilst working on this text I have become aware of how privileged I am in comparison. A real reason for me to be grateful!

Jesus' question: "Do you *want* to get well?" challenges the invalid to imagine the scenario of a possible cure. Naturally, overjoyed initially at getting back a body that is healthy! The ability to have a sense of feeling everywhere, from the little toe on your left foot to your right eyeball. To be able to master all your movements! Walking, running, standing on tip-toes, hopping on one leg without losing your balance. – But then also losing those who have helped you, those who have provided you with the essentials, those who have kept you alive ... Many new anxieties about a completely unfamiliar independence. Without a job, without any ability at all to provide for yourself?

The tiny germ of hope for a cure is therefore *also* connected, for the paralysed man, to massive uncertainties, anxieties about the future.

God himself promises in Isaiah 42 v.3:

*"A bruised reed he will not break, and a smouldering wick he will not snuff out".*

And yet indeed this incredible injunction from a stranger to the paralysed man :

*"Get up! Pick up your mat and walk!"*

Is God himself playing a part here? Evidently, the paralysed man feels, on hearing these powerful words, such an unprecedented change in the whole of his body and soul, that he is indeed able to obey the injunction, gets up, has the courage, the power to stand, even to pick up his mat *and* walk!

And Jesus? He simply disappears from the scene of his wondrous act ... in an utterly unspectacular way! He even follows the cured man, seeks and eventually finds him in the temple. Is he there on the Sabbath to thank his creator for the miracle cure? It occurs to me that Jesus is now showing him, after the healing of his body, the way to his further *spiritual life*. Physical healing is a great wonder. But genuine healing of the soul is, from a religious point of view, even more significant!

This too is only possible through God's grace. *It takes precedence for God!* It is a worthwhile ambition in life to understand this and then to accept it, and to learn to live in a different way!

Thank you for your kind attention!