



Civic Service

Proverbs 8:32-36, John 5:1-9

The story is told of a young woman in New York who had been seeing a great deal of a young man and romance was beginning to blossom. One day he called to say he had something special on his mind. He would pick her up in his car, an old but memorable set of wheels, and they would drive to the country for a picnic. They drove to Long Island. The young man seemed preoccupied. They drove along in silence. They then headed back to New York.

Back in the city, the young man broke his silence. He spoke solemnly of the great and significant event that was about to occur. Central Park, he said, would be the appropriate place for it to happen. They drove through the park on that beautiful spring day; the young woman's expectations soared. And the young man announced that the great moment was at hand. He slowed the car down, headed for a shady spot. This was it, he said, the climax had arrived. He was sure that she would feel the same excitement as himself. The car, in short, had at that carefully timed juncture, reached the 100,000 mile mark. The figures on the speedometer were turning slowly over as the car came to a halt.

"Everything is back to zero," said the young man, caught up in the rapture of the moment. "Yes," said the young woman, "Everything is back to zero."

High hopes and expectation dashed. She thought he was going to pop the question, but all he was interested in was his car! A typical man! Her expectations deflated faster than a balloon.

I'm sure something of that sort must have been in the mind of the man lying for 38 years at the Pool of Bethesda. We are not told what was wrong with him, other than it seems he could not walk. But like many other sick people he hung around the pool because there was a legend that the angel stirred the waters and the first one in got healed. We are not told by John whether anyone actually ever got healed and Bethesda was not known in other historical documents as a religious place. The pool was a real place where unusually, underground springs well up from time to time and agitate the surface of the water and this became stuff of folk legend. Perhaps it was one of those places that had got a reputation for miracles happening and therefore attracted people who hoped against hope that people were healed.

And into this scene comes to Jesus who speaks to the man and asks him an obvious question: **"Do you want to get well?"** A stupid question you may think, but Jesus doesn't get a direct answer, just a depressing one: *I've got no-one to put me in the pool on the odd occasions the water is disturbed".* In other words, as much as he wanted to get well, he had no expectation of being healed. Perhaps he was hoping against hope that Jesus would take pity on him and push him in should the waters be agitated at that moment. But nobody it seems had helped him in the previous 38 years, so he probably had no expectation that this guy with an up-country Galilean accent from out of town was going to help him anyway. For him I think was the saying. **"Blessed is he who expects nothing, for he shall never be disappointed."** - Alexander Pope, 1727 That was his expectation.

So why was he there? When people are without hope, they will do anything in the hope that they may just get lucky. We all know that some of the most vulnerable people in our society do the most reckless things in order to try and save their situation. They usually don't and often get ripped off. The most avid buyers of lottery tickets are people who can least afford to buy them.

Jesus surprised him by healing him. All the man had to do was get up and walk. He did just that and off he went.

What expectations do we have of Jesus? Is he part of our lives or off our radar? Let's be frank here, Jesus plays little part in most people's lives in Britain. But for those of us who have made Him part of our lives, we have found like that man at the Pool of Bethesda, that He makes a difference, and often a critical difference in our lives.

The other amazing thing about this story, is the man did not come to Jesus for help: Jesus came to him! It was Jesus who broke this man's 38 year cycle of despair. As a Christian, the most exciting thing about God is the way in which He invites us to know Him and wants us to make Him part of our lives and the decisions we make.

Whether we are leaders in politics, or business, in the voluntary sector or for that matter in churches, God wants us to seek His wisdom. For that matter, that applies to everyone else too. In the Proverbs passage we came across these words: **32 "So, my dear friends, listen carefully; those who embrace these my ways are most blessed. 33 Mark a life of discipline and live wisely; don't squander your precious life. 34 Blessed the man, blessed the woman, who listens to me, awake and ready for me each morning, alert and responsive as I start my day's work.** The I and me in this passage is God's wisdom speaking. Be prepared to seek out the wisdom of God in what you say and do because you will squander your life if you don't. That is the challenge to us this afternoon – put God into your equation of life, seek Him out because you'll find He's waiting for you.

I believe that it is an imperative if you are in public service. But it also applies to all of us. God wants to be a part of each of our lives. That's why Jesus came and died – so He could deal with the things that separate us from and so that we can know Him. In the words of Proverbs 8 35 When you find me, you find life, real life, to say nothing of God's good pleasure.

So Mike I encourage you, as I know other Church leaders here would do, to seek out God as you pursue the responsibilities of office. We also give you the assurance that the churches in Felixstowe regularly pray for the town and for the Town Council and other local authorities, for wisdom in what you do and the decisions you make.

Let me leave you with one final verse from the Bible as I close. It's another proverb from Proverbs 3:

Pro 3:5 Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding.

Pro 3:6 In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths (ESV).

Prayer

*Preached by Mark Reid
St Mary's Walton, 18/5/08
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Scripture Quotes as indicated.*

Proverbs 8:32-36 (from The Message)

32 "So, my dear friends, listen carefully; those who embrace these my ways are most blessed. 33 Mark a life of discipline and live wisely; don't squander your precious life. 34 Blessed the man, blessed the woman, who listens to me, awake and ready for me each morning, alert and responsive as I start my day's work. 35 When you find me, you find life, real life, to say nothing of God's good pleasure. 36 But if you wrong me, you damage your very soul; when you reject me, you're flirting with death."

John 5:1-9 (from the New International Version)

1 Some time later, Jesus went up to Jerusalem for a feast of the Jews. **2** Now there is in Jerusalem near the Sheep Gate a pool, which in Aramaic is called Bethesda and which is surrounded by five covered colonnades. **3** Here a great number of disabled people used to lie - the blind, the lame, the paralysed.

5 One who was there had been an invalid for thirty-eight years. **6** When Jesus saw him lying there and learned that he had been in this condition for a long time, he asked him, "Do you want to get well?" **7** "Sir," the invalid replied, "I have no one to help me into the pool when the water is stirred. While I am trying to get in, someone else goes down ahead of me." **8** Then Jesus said to him, "Get up! Pick up your mat and walk." **9** At once the man was cured; he picked up his mat and walked.