



The House of Mercy

John 5:1-18

In March 1854, British and French ships passed through the Dardanelles en route to Sevastopol on the Crimean Peninsula to confront the Russian fleet which was based there. It was the start of three years war as allies of Turkey who had been attacked by Russia over the control of Christian sites in Palestine amongst other things.

BETHESDA PHOTO 1

Victory came for the Allies in 1856 when a peace treaty was signed in Paris. The Ottoman Turks were so grateful to the British that they made Queen Victoria an offer. They could either take absolute control of the recently discovered Pool of Bethesda or they could have Cyprus. The Church of England lobbied the British Government hard to take control of Bethesda. For the government the choice was a no-brainer and Cyprus was added to the Empire. Instead the French took control of Bethesda.

BETHESDA PHOTO 2

The discovery of the site of the Pool of Bethesda or Bethzatha was a major archaeological event in the nineteenth century as up to that point no-one had a clue where it was and actually there were some that even said John made the story up! He hadn't (of course) and the French turned the ruins into a honeypot for religious tourists and it's still there today.

We are looking at the third of John's signs that Jesus was truly the Son of God today and this of course was the healing of the paralysed man at the pool of Bethesda.

BETHESDA PHOTO 3 The pool itself dates from as early as the 8th century BC and was outside the city walls and was fed by a covered aqueduct from a reservoir known as the upper pool. The aqueduct also fed a number of pools and reservoirs in Jerusalem. By 200BC a second pool was added and it seems by then it had earned a reputation as a spa.

In the 1st Century BC, the Greek rulers used its reputation as a place for healthy waters, to take it over as an asclepieion, which was a pool and temple dedicated to the Greek god of healing and medicine, Asclepius. It may have also been dedicated to Fortuna, the goddess of good fortune and got a reputation as a place where people may be miraculously healed when the waters were agitated.

BETHESDA

I might add, that the name of the pool has been debated over the years. The traditional name is Bethesda – house of mercy. Other names used are Bethzatha – House of Olives and Bethsaida – House of Five Porches. The names Bethesda and Bethzatha are the names most used by translators. The House of Mercy makes most sense to me as sick people went there in the hope that the gods may be merciful to them.

So the asclepieion was a pagan shrine, not a Jewish one, and in the Christian era, churches were build on the site to celebrate Jesus' miracle until they fell out of use in the middle ages and the site was lost until the early 19th century. In some translations of the Bible there is a verse 4 (left out of modern translations) about an angel that troubled the waters that suggests the shrine was Jewish but there is no evidence that the verse was originally in the gospel and recent archaeological evidence that it was pagan tends to confirm that.

At the particular time the pool had 5 porticoes built around it although I count 6 in the modern-day reconstruction of the ruins! Now most translations use the word porches, but the Greek could be translated porticoes which are covered collonades – in this case besides the pool where people waiting to be healed would lay out of the sun and the weather – common in Greek and Roman outdoor pools. The man who had been waiting for 38 years to be healed was waiting for the water to be agitated as tradition was that anyone who got in first was healed when the water was agitated. I know that some commentators mention a deep spring that may have agitated the water, but a cynical person like me would suggest that the water was agitated when water was sluiced from the reservoir above down to the pools and reservoirs it fed.

A HOUSE OF DISAPPOINTMENT

So what were a load of Jewish people doing at a pool dedicated to a pagan god? The long-term sick and disabled were the outcasts of Jewish society of that time. Their infirmity was seen as the product of either their sin or the sin of their family. What could they do? The recourse of some was towards the pagan shrines like Bethesda which means “House of Mercy” where they hoped that somehow they would find healing. The pool in Jesus' time was outside the city – the place of outcasts and sick.

What's significant was that it was on a visit to a Jewish festival that Jesus visits this pagan shrine. Why? Someone was to find genuine mercy at the House of Mercy, which was just a house of disappointment for the many people who hoped to be healed but probably never really were. Like the man who had been there for 38 years and never got healed because he could never get in when the water was agitated. Would it have made a difference if he had got there first? For him it was 38 years of disappointment.

CLUTCHING AT STRAWS?

What happens when people don't have the answers to the difficulties of life that they don't have control over and can't change? They clutch at straws. They try everything to change how things are, sometimes however wierd. But we live in a society where people don't connect to God but which is “spiritual” and superstitious. CS Lewis once said that when people cease believing in God, they don't believe in nothing, they believe in anything. And as far as I can see, will try anything. There was a report out this week that again underlined an increased interest in the spiritual – but that often expresses itself in New Age, spiritualism and Eastern religions and their practices. Rather like the people at the Pool of Bethesda, the House of Mercy – they look to these things to provide answers but they aren't there.

We know where the answers are don't we? In Christ! We say this, but are we resting in Him, depending on Him, knowing He is the one where mercy, compassion and love are found? Being a few days before Halloween reminds us again that Jesus died to break the power of satan, to overcome forces of darkness. Yet I know many Christians who clutch at straws as they face the problems and difficulties of life, and forget we belong to Jesus, the Creator, the Victor, the powerful One, the one that changes our minuses to pluses, the transformer of lives. Here's a verse from Psalms.

PSALM 96:4-5

*The LORD is great and is to be highly praised;
he is to be honoured more than all the gods.
The gods of all other nations are only idols,
but the LORD created the heavens.*

There was a second reason why Jesus went to the pool. Asclepius had gained the title of Saviour because he was supposed to have power to heal. But he was only an idol. He didn't have power because he didn't exist. Jesus is real and He demonstrated it by healing the man instantly – not troubled waters, no decades of waiting. Jesus has power over nature – over the “gods”. Jesus makes a difference. Wow. What joy the man who took up his bed and walked experienced. It was a true “impossible” miracle. He had been paralysed for 38 years. His muscles would have been atrophied. He could not have just walked. But he did. Just like that. Amazing!

You would have thought that the Jews would have been overjoyed at what Jesus did. This was at the time of a Jewish festival. Jesus walked into a pagan shrine and proved that God is more powerful than the gods of the pagans. By a word, Jesus did what 38 years of superstition could never have done. The paralysed man walked! Clearly God had done a great thing! What a witness to the Romans and to the Greeks who lived in the city and used these shrines. God was real. Their gods were just idols.

YOU CAN'T DO THAT!

But not a bit of it. "This is a Sabbath, and it is against our Law for you to carry your mat." They criticised the healed man because he was carrying his mat on the Sabbath as Jesus had commanded! They didn't see the miracle; just their laws broken. Think about it. God was at work in their city but they were so steeped in their religion that they missed a phenomenal miracle! The reason why was that Jewish law then and now was designed, was to make sure that no-one broke the Sabbath law accidentally by making a whole raft of rules. But the rules had become so important that they missed sight of what God was doing. God had healed someone on the Sabbath – so what if he was carrying his bed!

Of course as we read down the story the Jews find out it was Jesus who did the miracle on the Sabbath (against the law too) and commanded the man to carry his bed and walk. Jesus then starts talking of Himself as the Son – and that threw them into apoplexy! Oh dear. How blind they were – they couldn't see the power of God even though it was clearly manifest before them. Wasn't it just so obvious that God had done something amazing and perhaps there was something wrong with their law?

FEEL THE REALNESS

Let me ask us all a question this morning. Can we see what God is doing? Or are we too religious to notice? All the stuff that was in the Bible appears nowadays. It's available here now. One phrase that was in use amongst the younger generation in relation to trusting Jesus about a decade ago was this: feel the realness. Jesus is real and He really does change lives. Sometimes in a big way, sometimes in a small way. Sometimes miraculously, sometimes not. But feel the realness.

I was brought up in a church that denied that the gifts of the Spirit and the miraculous were a modern reality. They said it was for Jesus and for the first century church. So when people

started to talk about manifestations of the Spirit then they were mistaken, or they were emotional, or worse – they said it was not of God. But people were being saved as a result of seeing God at work in the lives of themselves or others. Yet because these folks were steeped in their traditions, they didn't see God working. They didn't recognise Him. They didn't worship Him as a result. And they lost out on blessing.

God doesn't want us to lose out on blessing just because of our traditions however noble they seem. Look at what God is doing. Trust Him. Follow Him.

We live in a world that's looking for a faith that's real. That works. That's life changing. Jesus is all of that. He's our Saviour, this is our faith. And if that's not the reality, then why not?

PRAYER

Let's pray this morning:

For forgiveness for times when we have clutched at straws and chased after things we shouldn't have.

That we may trust Jesus and make Him central to all our decisions and actions.

For that change in our lives that makes us look beyond what our experience of Jesus and of faith is, towards what God is doing and what God wants to do in our lives and in our church.

That we will trust and obey in whatever God wants us to do and wherever He wants us to go.

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