**John 5:1-9**

**Responding to the Undeserved Grace of God**

There are so many stories of healing in the Gospels; so many occasions when Jesus meets with individuals and brings them wholeness, either physical or mental or both. Hundreds of people benefited from Jesus’ touch throughout his earthly ministry.

 And it is not surprising, perhaps, that because Jesus healed individuals – ordinary people like you and me - there is something different to learn from each story. God deals with each one of us differently. He recognises and respects our individuality. So, as we consider the healing of the man by the Pool at Bathzatha, we are not looking at just another healing by Jesus. We are looking at the interaction between the Son of God and a human being. And so we learn something unique to that situation - but also some principles that we can carry through into our own relationship with God.

 So let’s give some thought to this story from John 5, on page 103 of the pew Bibles.

 The pool at Bathzatha – which is the setting for this story - was famous for its healing powers. It was perhaps a Jerusalem equivalent of Lourdes or Walsingham. Allegedly, the waters would be still until stirred up by a spirit or an angel. And when the waters stirred: that was when they held healing powers. So it is not surprising that many, many sick people would sit beside the pool, perhaps for hours or days or weeks or months on end, waiting for the waters to stir so they could leap in and receive healing. It was a fascinating place: the marginalised and outcasts of society sitting within the shadow of the Temple, hoping and praying for a miracle so they could be made whole again.

 And, one day, Jesus visited the Pool of Bethzatha. That, in itself, is an incredible fact for us to think about. Jesus, the good Jew that he was, was in Jerusalem for a festival at the Temple. There would have been good worship and celebrations, food and wine, a chance to catch up with old friends and relatives. But here is Jesus, choosing instead to spend his time with the marginalised and the outcasts. That, in itself, tells us a great deal about the character of Jesus and the priorities of God: perhaps the priorities that should be mirrored in our own church life…

 And so begins a fascinating encounter. And, as with so many passages of Scripture it is not as straightforward as it might appear at first…

 Jesus is by the Pool and he sees the man and realises that he has been there a long time. So Jesus says to him, ‘Do you want to be made well?’ It may seem like a strange question - but I don’t think it is. The harsh truth is that there are some people in life who genuinely don’t want to be well because they gain a sense of identity from their sickness. It is something I have come across time and time again in more than 20 years of pastoral ministry. Occasionally, an individual may talk about their problems over many months, even years, but never take any steps towards a solution and always avoiding a real healing. It’s almost as if, deep down, they are afraid to be healed because they have become defined by their need and fear that, if their need is removed, they won’t know who they are anymore. So they would rather be in pain and have an identity and be noticed than risk being healed where they might lose their identity and risk not being noticed anymore.

 So this is actually a very insightful question from Jesus: “Do you want to be healed?”

 And, perhaps predictably, the man comes up with what, when we consider it, seems to be a pretty lame excuse. “I have been here for 38 years. I have no-one to put me in the waters when they are stirred up.”

 Really? I don’t want to sound harsh – but it does beg the question…

 Is he really suggesting that in 38 years, no-one has been available to put him in the water? Over a period of four decades, not one person had sat with him and offered to help him to the stirring pool? It really seems hard to believe, doesn’t it?

 More likely, given Jesus insightful question, he had probably become institutionalised into his sickness. His whole life was now revolving around sitting there by the Pool.

 The truth is, he probably wasn’t working too hard at receiving a healing.

 Now, you may think I am being harsh but, as we see how the story develops, I think there is more evidence to discover.

 Jesus says to the man, ‘Stand up, take your mat and walk’ - and the man picks up his mat and begins to walk. It is a wonderful healing! But this is the Sabbath, as we read in verse 9, and we go on to read in verse 10 that the Pharisees say to the man, ‘’It’s the Sabbath – it’s illegal to carry your mat on the Sabbath’. And what does the healed man say to them? ‘The man who made me well said to me, “Pick up your mat and walk”’.

 Now, I find that a very strange response; strange, because it seems really ungrateful! ‘The man who made me well…’ 38 years he had sat by the Poolside, seemingly waiting for a healing. And now, at last, he has been healed by Jesus. And yet he doesn’t even bother to find out his name! Jesus heals him and the man just gets up, picks up the mat and walks off How ungrateful is that? And when he is challenged on his behaviour by the Pharisees, he blames Jesus! ‘It’s not my fault! Don’t blame me! The man who healed me made me do it!’

 I find the attitude of this man quite incredible. He has received a life-changing act of grace from the Son of God - and he just walks off. And then he points a finger of blame at Jesus when it suits him.

 So for me, this story is not so much about the healing power of God as it is about the attitude we have when we encounter the work of God in our lives.

 And the first question we are encountered by is this: ‘Do you want to be healed?’ Now, that may be about receiving a physical healing from God. It may be about receiving a healing of attitude or emotions or healing of past memories or some such. But it is just as likely a question to be asked of us by God regarding our spiritual life. We come to church each week and we say we love God and we say we want to grow spiritually and to develop as spiritual beings. But Jesus asks us to look deep inside and ask ourselves the question: how much do we *really* want to grow? What are we prepared to do to grow with God? How much energy are we prepared to put into our spiritual disciplines? What are we prepared to give up and let go? Who are we prepared to forgive?

 Jesus looks at each one of us today and he says, ‘Do you want to be healed?’ Let’s not be too quick to respond. Let’s not be too shallow in our response. Let’s not just say as a knee-jerk reaction, ‘Of course I do!’ Let’s attend to ourselves and look deep inside. ‘Do you *really* want to be healed?’

 And the second challenge to us is this: How do we show our gratitude to God when we have received grace from him? Most of us here today, I guess, would say that we have experienced something of God’s grace in our lives. Have we expressed appropriate gratitude to God in this? Or, like the man in the story, do we just walk away and get on with our lives without giving Jesus a second thought. And then, of course, when we encounter difficulties in our lives, are we quick to point the finger of blame at God and say, ‘It’s all his fault’? I suspect there is more of this ungracious, blaming man in each one of us than we would care to admit…

 The conclusion of this story is in verse 14: ‘Later Jesus found him at the temple and said to him, "See, you are well again. Stop sinning or something worse may happen to you." The man went away and told the Jews that it was Jesus who had made him well.’ The man may have been ungrateful, he may have blamed Jesus, but still Jesus seeks him out. And so it is with us, that even in our ungracious attitude to God, even though we too are quick to point the finger, when things in our lives do not go how we wished they would…even then, Jesus seeks us out.

 And, on this occasion, he confronts the man about his behaviour and he says to the man ‘You are well again. Stop sinning or something worse may happen to you.’ There is a clear warning there from Jesus about taking God’s grace for granted. God has made us well – he has met us with his grace. Jesus warns us not to take that grace for granted, lest something worse happens to us.

 In our story, the healed man gets the point and it ends with the words, ‘The man went away and told the Jews that it was Jesus who had made him well.’ He repents and he changes his ways. And so it is that there is a call to repentance on us too. If we think that we have taken God’ grace for granted, if we think that we have been too quick to blame God for life’s circumstances, there is an opportunity for us to repent of our behaviour and change our ways.

 Today, let us take time out to think about the acts of God’s grace in our lives: to coin a very old phrase, let us take time to count our blessings and then to show the gratitude we owe to God. It is the good and proper and right thing to do. It is the response of faith and love to a God who has first sought us out and brought us all the healing we need, undeserving as we are. Amen.