**SUNDAY OF THE PARALYSED MAN - St John 5:1-15**

Christ is risen!

When reading the Gospel and encountering those texts which are familiar to us and therefore in danger of becoming stale and impotent, the Fathers counsel us to analyse the characters in each account and try to place ourselves fully in the place of that person, mentally, psychologically and spiritually to draw more meaning from the texts. Today I should like to look briefly at the Jews in the Gospel reading and see what they have to say to us from their words and deeds.

In the account they are mentioned three times. In the first case they say to the man who is cured, "It is the Sabbath. It is not lawful for you to carry your pallet." Then they ask him "Who is the man who said to you, 'Take up your pallet and walk'?" And in the third instance we are told by St John, "And this was why the Jews persecuted Jesus, because he did this on the Sabbath."

The first thing that strikes us about all three extracts is that nowhere is there any sense of joy or sympathy for the man, who is no doubt well known since he has been lying at the pool of Bethesda for thirty­ eight years. He has been healed in the most unexpected and miraculous way and yet there is no sense according to the evidence provided of wonder and overwhelming gratitude to God. The main concern of the Jews seems to be that the rules of the Sabbath have been broken and that this is a great offence. Now we may ask, "What is it that makes these apparently strictly religious people seem so hard-hearted and impervious to the miracle that has befallen this stricken creature but instead insist on a discipline which seems of very secondary importance?" There can of course be numerous and diverse answers and many of them will strike a chord within ourselves. One of them is worldly power. Religion, as many today have seen, means power both in a financial sense and in terms of control over people. New forms of religion or cults abound. They suck in people who have no spiritual background or culture as a spiritual base, and successfully, imprison and manipulate their adherents. The Orthodox Church has known this in its history too and episcopal and priestly dictatorship flourishes today in various places. Jesus' miracle openly threatens this power and reassigns it to God where it properly belongs. Then there is the desire for control of situations and people, the so-called control freak, who cannot bear it otherwise than how he sees it and wants it to be. And thereby he reduces the world to his own limited and ultimately suffocating vision and version of it. What he seeks to control falls through his hands like water because God ultimately builds the Church as the Psalmist reminds us: "Unless the Lord builds the house, those who build it labour in vain." Essentially, this must be some kind of deep seated fear of life and the unexpected which must plan and organise because it must be in familiar and secure territory. It is the other side of the coin with the face of power and ambition and so far from the image of the wind, the Holy Spirit, blowing freely where it, or rather God wills in our lives and in that of the Church. And perhaps this mentality overlaps with the third type, obsessed with rules and procedures, which are an end in themselves, not a means to an end. Again it will no doubt be connected with fear of the unknown and the unfamiliar and an inbuilt reluctance to accept and appreciate the other as he is in his own individuality and beauty. No, the rules give order and prevent chaos and therefore must be obeyed. But these rules can choke and stultify rather than expand and inspire.

In all of these attitudes there is something of ourselves and it is not that the essential attitude is wrong. Otherwise we would have no civil servants or leaders. Rather it is the lengths to which they go and thus give the wrong priority and perspective on life. Christ's healing in today's account is an astonishing event in that its simple compassion for an apparently hopeless invalid breaks through all the religious red tape and brings us back to what our faith is all about, love for God and our

fellow man, which cannot be separated. Deeply embedded in the account is the contrast between the Old and New Covenants between God and his people and the overwhelming superiority of the latter to echo the words of St Paul. The angel only appears at certain seasons and only at the pool and according to a set formula the first man to step down into the pool receives healing. The healing is not given directly from God to Man but requires the mediation of angels like the law given to Moses.

But Christ's healing is immediate and direct and does not require the medium of a pool, water or an angel. It does not exclude, "For power went forth from him and he healed them all". It reminds one of the directness of the centurion whose faith in Christ is so great that he urges him not to waste time in coming to his house but simply to utter the word from a distance to effect the cure. And consequently, the response is instantaneous. It is also a direct meeting between man and God without barriers and the reaction is great and positive, as ever when we meet God, unlike that of the meeting with the Jews, who react negatively and with anger and hatred because their religious behaviour stands exposed.

But this contrast of Old and New Covenants, of the law of grace and the written law, has much to say to us about our relationship with God and with others. At this time in the Church year we are introduced again to the person of St Paul who voluntarily exchanged the written law which he described as helpful but inadequate for the law of grace or love, namely God's unconditional, unlimited love for us. Something happened to him on the road to Damascus which we read about on Friday in the appointed texts and thereafter to convince him that understanding and appreciating God's sacrifice for us in the person of his Son was far more important than the observance of all the laws which he had been trained to observe strictly. Weakness, acceptance, gratitude and life replace control, perfectionism and self-justification which lead to death. · -

And ultimately that brings us to how these two forces operate in us. Hopefully, love predominates in our attitudes and behaviour with our partners, our family and our colleagues. But there are times when a cloud descends and only stark duty remains to keep us going. It is the same with God. The joy of communion with Christ is replaced by dull repetitive prayer often because of the daily round of worldly tasks, which bring tiredness and drudgery. We find ourselves in a pattern, which becomes fixed, inflexible and enclosed. There is of course a sense in which while we are in the body it will be forever like this, unless we are given the powerful mystical gift of love like Lady Julian of Norwich or Mother Maria who died in somebody else's place in Ravensbruck and Fr Maximilian Kolbe, the Catholic priest who similarly offered his life for another in a dark underground cramped prison cell, the horror of which my wife and I witnessed some years ago in Auschwitz. But the writings of the saints of all traditions make it clear that we are to stand before God firstly in silent adoration and awe knowing before whom we stand. And then we are to try to address him by summoning up everything from within that is in our hearts sincerely as our spirits inspire us. And this needs quietness and stillness to ascertain because there is much to penetrate before we can speak dispassionately and meaningfully. In connection with this, both in our dealings with God and with our loved ones we need to be on our guard to see when routine duty or often repeated words have replaced the spontaneous, light, playful touch of love which mirrors God's attitude to his world and his people and also the attitude of those who in every sense are in love. The problem highlighted in today's Gospel is that which afflicts us all of putting the law before love or of making man the servant of the Sabbath rather than recalling what Christ said that "the Sabbath is made for man, not man for the Sabbath". One solution is something which the Church offers us namely to come regularly, humbly, penitently but expectantly to the Feast of the Kingdom, where Christ gives himself to us ever anew in the simple gifts of bread and wine and listen attentively for his voice.

***Oxford 11th May 2025***

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