

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

Christ is Risen!

Today's Gospel about the healing of a man who had been a paralytic for thirty-eight years has several interesting aspects to it, not least among which is the reason why it is appointed for the fourth Sunday of Pascha. At the beginning of the account we find ourselves beside a pool, Bethzatha or Bethesda, (literally 'House of Mercy') in Jerusalem, where invalids are accustomed to lie because it is a place which has a reputation for miraculous healing. From time to time the water is troubled by an angel and given healing powers so that the first person to step in is healed of whatever disease they have. It is noteworthy that these places of healing are regularly created by God in the world and not just the Christian world for the benefit of mankind. We may think of Lourdes in the Pyrenees where thousands go regularly on pilgrimages and healings take place. Or Sednaya monastery in Syria where both Christian and non-Christian women who are infertile pray to the Mother of God to become pregnant and their prayers are often granted. Years ago I often used to go to the chapel in the rue du Bac just behind the Bon Marche department store, where the Mother of God appeared to a young nun and told her to urge people to come and pray at the foot of the altar where she would pour out her grace; and to confirm it she gave the sister a design for a miraculous medal which is often worn by pilgrims to the site both Catholic and other confessions.

When Jesus arrives at the pool he knows all about the man's patience in waiting to be healed, his inability to reach the waters first and his thirty-eight years of suffering. He simply approaches the man and asks him, "Do you want to be healed?" His answer clearly indicates that he does but he cannot follow the established way of descending into the pool. Jesus then heals him suddenly and dramatically without any reference to the pool with the words "Arise. Take up your bed and walk!" There is an important contrast here between the two methods of healing, between the Old and New Covenants, between works and faith. The pool represents the Old Covenant. It requires patience and waiting, often for years. It is given through angels like the commandments to Moses. It requires the observing of set rules and brings healing to some. But Christ's way is utterly different, totally superior to the pool and immediate. The Gospels say that 'he healed them all'. His way requires only the deep longing of faith that answers the question "Do you want to be healed?" with the unstated assertion, "Yes, now, today". And this answer unlocks the door of heaven and brings immediate divine healing. There is much in our Orthodox tradition which rightly teaches us about the "faith and patience which inherit the promises", to quote the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews, but today's Gospel reminds us that "now is the acceptable hour; now is the time of salvation". Christ is risen from the dead nothing can be the same, as we are in the era of the Kingdom, where, to quote again from the Epistle to the Hebrews, "Christ has sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on High, having become as much superior to angels as the name he has obtained is more excellent than theirs".

Throughout the season of Pascha, as we follow the readings from the Acts of the Apostles and the Gospel of John, we are deliberately confronted with many

dramatic events and miracles: the healings by Peter and John as they go to the Temple and in Solomon's Portico; the escape from prison through the intervention of an angel, who undoes chains and opens doors while the guards sleep. And while all these 'Pentecostal' events are taking place, the Church is being added to daily and spreading rapidly to Ethiopia, Antioch, Asia Minor, Cyprus and Greece and to the East. On the other hand, we see a powerful spiritual battle beginning to take place and the divisions which the Lord says in the Gospels he has come to bring, as the leaders of the Jews react forcibly and violently to the Apostles and their followers and soon initiate a cruel persecution with the help of a man who is late to die for Christ.

And this is another important aspect of today's Gospel tied up with the contrast between the Old and New covenants. For Jesus the tragedy of this man waiting hopelessly in a seemingly impossible situation for God to visit him is paramount. For the Jews, the transgression of some albeit man-made ritual, though derived legitimately from the Mosaic commandment to rest physically and spiritually on the Sabbath takes precedence over an act of love. And we are told in the following verse after the reading that the Jews persecuted Jesus because he healed the man on the Sabbath.

We Orthodox often fall victim in our own way to putting the letter of the law before the spirit, particularly in our prayer and worship, where we think the most important thing is to say long prayers and to get it right as the typicon or tradition directs but do not speak to God from our hearts or try to listen in silence for his voice. There is a very salutary reminder in one of the stories of the Jewish Hassidim. A young man says to the rabbi, "I fear I did not listen closely to you and perhaps skipped a word while I was silently reading the scroll with you". Later the rabbi says to his friends, "There's your super-pious man! All he cares about is doing exactly what is prescribed. But he whose soul is directed towards doing the will of God within the commandment and clings wholly to God's will may very possibly fail to do something of what is prescribed but it does not trouble him. For it is written, 'In thy love for her wilt thou err constantly'."

For the remainder of the Feast we are in a very special way in the company of the bridegroom who has arrived after the patient waiting and struggling of the Great Fast. The juxtaposition of the two sources of healing in today's Gospel serves to remind us of the greatness and uniqueness of the Christian faith, which we hold through Christ's voluntary death and resurrection. May God grant us also to experience what the paralytic experienced through faith in Christ in some less dramatic yet meaningful way during this glorious feast.

Christ is Risen!

23^d May 2021, Oxford

