**25th October 2015**

**John 5.1-18**

Tom Wright in his commentary on this passage starts by describing how two small boys were playing in an overgrown garden. The old man who lived in the big house had been ill for many weeks, and though nurses and doctors came and went to the house nobody seemed to bother about what happened to the garden. So the brothers had quietly taken it over.

They didn’t know what to do with the tennis court. They had never seen anyone play tennis, but the markings on the ground suggested it was for some kind of game. The net hung slack in the middle of the court, and since the only ball they had was a football, they had invented a game of kicking the ball over the net to each other and trying to land it within the lines on the other side. It more or less worked, but was not the most exacting ball game ever invented.

One day the old man’s son came from abroad to visit his father. Looking from upstairs window down the long garden, he saw the two boys playing their made-up game. He smiled. Going to a cupboard, he collected an armful of tennis equipment. The boys were alarmed when they saw him coming down the garden. But he wasn’t angry.

‘Would you like to play with the real thing?’

‘What’s the real thing?’

‘Tennis of course! Here, I’ll show you’

And within minutes he had swept leaves off the court, tightened the net. Equipped the boys with rackets, and begun to teach them difficult but far more rewarding game that the court was built for.

The pool of Bethesda was a well-known place of healing. It was in Jerusalem itself, just to the north of the Temple Mount area. The original site has been excavated by archaeologists and if you go to Jerusalem you can see it for yourself. But it wasn’t just a Jewish healing place. The evidence suggests that pagans, too, regarded it as a sacred site. At one stage it was dedicated to the healing god Asclepius.

The way it worked seems to have been like this. The waters in the pool would bubble up periodically; when that happened, the first person to get in would be healed. Some people reckoned that the bubbling water was caused by an angel. The reason there is no verse 4 in this passage is that several ancient copies of the gospel have an extra verse at this point explaining all this, but most of the oldest and best copies haven’t got it – which is why there is a footnote in your pew bible.

But the shrine didn’t seem particularly successful. Clearly the man Jesus found lying there had made quite a life out of his long wait for healing. Jesus’ question to him is perhaps quite pointed: do you really want to get better, or are you now quite happy to eke out your days lounging around here with the feeble excuse that some else always gets in first? It is a shocking thing to say to a disabled person! Do you want to get well? But for some people maybe that is the challenge they need. Some can become frozen in their despair, that they give up hope, give up any longing for healing and new life. Some people can become trapped in being a victim and not move on to overcome. It sounds a bit cruel: on a par with get on yer bike if you haven’t got a job – go and find one and pull yourself up with your bootstraps. But context is everything. This man had been lying there for 38 years – nothing had changed and Jesus comes along bringing change. Not stirring the water – but stirring this man’s soul. - The whole scene, with its legends and its pagan associations, was like the two boys playing football on a tennis court. The place spoke of the possibility of miraculous healing, of the remote chance of divine healing, but it was at best spasmodic, and at worst an idle dream.

Then along comes the one who, John has been telling us, is the true son of the true God. In a flash, he does what the pool stood for but what it hadn’t been doing very successfully. As with the official’s sons in the previous passage, a word is all it takes, in this case a command to get up, pick up your mat and walk. We aren’t even told whether this man ‘believed’, but clearly he must have done or he wouldn’t have obeyed Jesus’ order. He now finds himself launched on the much harder, but more satisfying, way of life that goes with no longer being a cripple.

As with many of the gospel stories, particularly in John, what Jesus does fulfils the hopes and longings of the Jewish world, expressed as they were in various ways, not least the great festivals (verse 1). Here, however, Jesus seems to be fulfilling the hopes and half formed beliefs of the pagan world as well. Part of the point of the gospel is that, if ‘salvation is of the Jews’ and if Jesus is now bringing that salvation, it must spread out from the Jews to embrace the wider world. The pagan shrine points dimly to the healing that Jesus was bringing, rather as the strange game of football in tennis court points to the game the court was made for.

Halloween is this week. On one level Halloween is a bit of fun: an excuse for a themed party. On a more thoughtful level it is a playful acknowledgement of the dark side of life. It can help us to beware of the evil in the world and in us. For others, an increasing minority, it is a very significant celebration.

It has its origins in pagan rituals connected to the onset of winter and the theme of life and death. It was the start of the ancient Celtic new year. Druids would contact the dead to ask their guidance and inspiration for the year ahead. The development of Halloween is, ironically, down to the Christian church. Christianity ‘took over’ festivals of pre-Christian religions and changed their meaning. Halloween with its veneration of earth deities and times and seasons and sacrifices (even human ones) was converted to Hallowtide: the Feast of All Saints. Hallow’s Eve (Halloween) would reflect on the powers of darkness, acknowledging that they exist in the world, but the following day would be a celebration of the triumph of light and goodness and the victory of all the saints of God against all the agents of the devil.

Today, Halloween is commercially exploited and is associated with demons, ghouls, witches and things that go bump in the night. The connection with light overcoming darkness, the certainty of the triumph of good over evil, is, I would argue, lost in the midst of the cheap plastic masks, fake blood and horror films. Some parents complain that it stimulates, in a negative and disturbing way, children’s imaginations. Others are concerned that it is a focus and a gateway for involvement in the Occult.

Paganism looks at the world of creation and tries to harness forces within it for its own ends. The healing that Jesus offers is the reality that the created world was waiting for, the beginning of a new creation. The salvation that the Son of God brings when he comes into the world is the new day that had they but known it, Israel and the world had been longing for.

In view of the rest of the chapter (see particularly 25-29) we may be allowed to see a hint in verse 8 of what that new creation will look like. When Jesus says get up! The word is one regularly used in the NT to describe the resurrection. Here is part of the inner secret of Jesus work. He isn’t trying to use force within the existing creation to put right something else that’s gone wrong within the same old creation. He is bringing new life, a new creation. It bursts through into the present world, bringing healing and new possibilities. And the old creation realises – like boys beginning to play tennis – that this had been intended all along. No wonder people found it disturbing. No wonder – they even found it threatening and scandalous.

Jesus heals this man on the Sabbath. The Sabbath was originally when the Creator God rested from his work in making the world. Week by week the law observant Jews kept a strict day without work – defining quite carefully what ‘work’ might include so there would be no doubt.

Jesus, however, seems systematically to have continued doing things on the Sabbath that could be understood – and were understood by some at least of his opponents – as deliberate ‘work’. After all, in the present case he didn’t have to heal the man that day. He’d waited for forty years to be healed; another day would not have hurt him. But Jesus seems to be deliberately to have chosen that day. And , though what Jesus himself had done was hardly ‘work’ – all he’d done was to issue a command – what he’d told the man to do, to carry his mattress, certainly was.

Jesus explanation was that he was living in a different time zone. His father was at work and it was important for him to be as well. What could he have meant?

The heart of it seems to be Jesus belief that Israel’s God was then and there in the process of launching a new creation. And somehow this new creation was superseding the old one. Its timescale was taking precedence. God was healing the sorry, sick old world, and though there might come a time for rest (when Jesus own work was finished) at the moment it was time for the work of the new creation to go forward especially from John’s point of view, if the signs correspond in some way to the ‘days of the new creation.

Such a viewpoint was not popular with law observant Judeans – those Jews living in the southern half of Israel. Here we meet the sharpest opposition so far which would lead ultimately to Jesus being arrested and put to death by them.

If Jesus work of healing was going forward, what was holding it up? Not just opposition, but also sin. There is a dark mystery here, because in the present case Jesus implies that the crippled man had got into his present condition because of his own sin (verse 14). But four chapters later Jesus also insists that the condition of the man born blind had nothing to do with anyone’s sin (9.1-13). It seems that some sicknesses may be related to some sins, but you can’t and shouldn’t deduce the one from the other. For some people they can clearly see how their sin has led them to sickness. But for many sick people it would be an absurd conclusion. Indeed there are many healthy and cheerful sinners around to debunk an absolute connection between sin and suffering. Often when people come for prayer for healing, one of the first questions we ask is ‘why do you think you are the way you are? What has caused this? Sometimes people know and we start there.

What we see here is in fact the expansion and outworking of the short sad statement in the gospel prologue (1.10-11): ‘He came to his own, and his own did not accept him’; they were not ready for new creation, for the living word of God to come to them with new things to say. They were living in the old time zone, and were angry with Jesus for, as it were, waking them up too soon. The battle of time zones will continue until it reaches its climax on the cross.

This battle continues today, though in another form. With Jesus resurrection, God’s new creation project is launched upon the whole world. People still react angrily to it. Where are the followers of Jesus today who are prepared to say ‘Jesus is at work, and so am I?’

The other big scandal of this passage is that there's not one word about the crippled man’s faith in this text. Not one hint that he believed in Jesus or anything else except the magic water in the pool. And, we find out that he wasn't even grateful for being healed. In fact, when the religious authorities see him walking around carrying his mat, they ask him, "Who healed you?" and he says he doesn't even know. Then when the authorities go on to inform him that healing and mat-carrying is illegal on the Sabbath, he squeals and fingers Jesus as the one who healed him and told him to carry his mat. "Jesus broke the Sabbath laws, not me!" This is the one Jesus healed.

Who is he? He's a real bum, that's who he is! He had no gratitude, no faith, no humility, no guts. He didn't deserve to be healed. He didn't deserve anything. This is the one Jesus healed. This is the one, the one who had been on welfare benefits for 38 years. He's one of those people that are described as "the undeserving poor." Those are the people lying around, down by the poolside. Those people are the ones Jesus healed.

Jesus healed this man not because of who the man was, not because of who the person was, but because of who Jesus was. Fred Craddock talks about this story as a parable of God's grace, the undeserved, unmerited love of God. That's a radical idea, and it's right at the heart of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. It's the reason Jesus taught. It's the reason Jesus could teach "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you," not because of who they are, but because of who you are as my disciples.

I don't know how it is with you, but I'm grateful everyday that God deals with me according to who God is, not according to who I am. I don't have any trouble at all singing the hymn, "Amazing grace, how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me."

Interesting, isn't it, that the pool in this story from the Gospel of John is right in the shadow of the temple, right in the shadow of the church. How many people do you know, I mean really hurting people you know, who have left the temple, left the church for the pool? In John's story, the temple (institutionalized religion, the church) wanted nothing to do with the undeserving poor. So they went to the pool. So did Jesus. And that's where Jesus healed. Down by the poolside.

May God continue to challenge us: ‘do we want to be well?’

And may god offer his power and strength in order that we may ‘pick up our mats and walk’.

Taken from Tom Wright: John for Everyone, pub SPCK

Questions:

Was Jesus right to ask ‘do you want to get well?’ Would you ever say that to someone who had been ill for some time?

Do you think the lame man had faith or not?

How do we reach people who are looking for the spiritual outside of mainstream religion? What about people who are superstitious?

Halloween: love it or hate it?

Does God help those who help themselves?

Why did Jesus heal on the Sabbath?

How do you respond to the view that sin may cause sickness?