



HEALING MINISTRY by Father Robbie Low Talk 6

John Chapter 5 The Pool of Bethesda

On my one long-ago visit to Jerusalem one of the places that has always lodged in my memory is the site of the Pool of Bethesda. It nestles in the shadow of the Church of St Anne. This great Crusader church was built on the site of the previous Byzantine church, destroyed by the Persians, and believed to be the childhood home of Our Lady – hence the dedication to her parents. Since 1878 it has been administered by the White Fathers and Fr Ciaran, consequently, can tell you much more about it than me. My abiding memory is that its acoustic is so remarkable that a note reverberates for some fourteen seconds. Anyway enough reminiscing.

Here, hard by the site of Granny's house, Jesus comes to the Pool. Bethesda is an Asclepion – a site of the Greek god of Healing (whose children include Hygiene and Panacea!) The Pool is well known as a site where, when the water is troubled, the first into the Pool may be healed. Hence it is festooned with the infirm on their mats all watching for the magic moment. When the spirit moves on the water, the lame charge for the pool. The man in this account of John's Gospel has been here for an astonishing thirty eight years and never been first into the pool. Jesus approaches him, quite discreetly, for we discover, subsequently, that the lame man has no idea who He is until much later. And Jesus asks him what seems an insensitive and impertinent question. 'Do you want to be healed?' Imagine that as the opening shot of the Hospital Chaplain.

But it is a good question. This man has failed, in 38 years, to get in first. You would think that he would be sitting on the water's edge waiting to fall in at the first trembling of the surface.

Jesus is checking him out. He is well aware that, for some people, chronic illness becomes a way of life. Dependent, fed by alms or charitable assistance, the incentive to change is eroded. It is not that the invalid consciously avoids the opportunity of grace but rather, subconsciously, discounts it and the expectation and desire atrophy. This is difficult pastoral territory. Most priests will encounter much genuine and tragic illness and disability but sometimes they will also encounter situations where the infirm have made a way of life of that infirmity. What on earth would this man do if he was healed? So Jesus asks the ultimate insensitive question to which the evidence points. 'Do you want to be healed?'

The obvious answer is 'YES ! YES ! YES !' but Jesus makes the man own it. If you think this is an unreasonable question, ask yourself, when you next go to Bethesda, do you really want to be healed? Me, go to Bethesda? When do I go there? For Bethesda means the 'House of Grace and Mercy' and for all of us that is the place where we seek healing, the washing of what soils us, the handicap that lames and inhibits our journey. I refer, of course, to the confessional. When we sit by the Pool of Mercy, do we really want Christ's healing?

In order for him/us to access that wonderful restorative therapy that sets us free and allows us/him to go into the Temple (as he immediately does) rejoicing, we needs must want it and not want to cling to what disables us – so familiar have we become with our besetting infirmities, so used to incorporating them into our lives that they become the dominant and defining feature of our personality and our demeanour.

Jesus is asking the lame man and us, 'Do you really want to be healed? Are you ready for what will come next if you are set free? Are you up for it or has it become too comfortable, the proximity to Grace sufficient without ever participating in it?'

Curiously the man only gets to know who has healed him when Jesus encounters him in the Temple later – and that too will be the experience of some who have been transformed by Jesus but only come to know Him as they give thanks and worship in the Presence. Healing on the Sabbath is no accident.