

You may have heard it said of someone, ‘Oh, he/she enjoys bad health.’ The implication is that this person rather enjoys the sympathy, the extra attention and even the status conferred on them by their affliction.

Let us just stop for a moment and ask – would anyone, deep down, prefer sickness to health? Sickness, prolonged sickness, would eat into anyone, into their very being. OK, they might become demanding, even selfish – but I would still want to ask that question, would anyone, deep down, prefer sickness to health?

With this in mind, let us turn to our Gospel reading for today. It is set in the context of one of Jesus’ early visits to Jerusalem told to us by the writer of John’s Gospel. The scene is set at the Pool of Beth-zatha, or elsewhere rendered as Bethsaida. It is a large pool set on the outskirts of the old City of Jerusalem, that is visible to this day, having been recently uncovered by archaeologists. Depending which name you choose from the texts, this can either mean ‘house of pity’ or ‘house of mercy’. There was a tradition attached to this place that periodically an angel would trouble the waters and the first person who managed to make it down into the water at that point would be healed of whatever was their affliction.

In our Gospel reading, our story focusses on two individuals. There is Jesus on what is one of his early trips to Jerusalem for one of the Jewish Festivals. The other is a man, unable to walk, who had been sick for 38 years. We are told Jesus asks him, ‘Do you want to be made well?’

This would seem to be a straightforward enough. Who would not want to be made well. The answer is more complex. You can sense a frustration in the man's reply. Referring to the tradition of the waters being troubled; 'I've no one to help me into the pool when the water is troubled. When I do get there it is always too late.'