

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, house of grace’. 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.' There is a fatalism to his reply. This is the way I am – try as I might things are not going to change. Yes, I would love not to have to lie here day after day – I just have to accept this is the way life is for me. There is a loneliness. I have no-one who cares enough about me, who is going to give me the help, the lift I need.

We may not experience the physical limitations of the man lying by that pool year after year. But are there other ways in which Bethesda is part of our experience, or that of someone we love? Some aspect of life in which life seems so unfair, even cruel. Trapped in situations in which there seems to be no way out. It could be relationship, could be job, could just be life seeming to go nowhere. Those around us seem to be coping so much better and no one seems to notice our loneliness – and no-one seems to notice, and no-one seems to care.

I recall the range of possible meanings for the name of that place, Bethesda, Beth-zatha – 'house of pity' or 'house of mercy, house of grace'. For the man lying by the pool that day as Jesus approached him and spoke to him, what had been for him a house of pity, of hopelessness, became a house of grace, of healing. In that encounter God, in the person of Jesus spoke to him in words that broke through his sense of isolation, of futility.

To return to the present, to life as we live it, life as we experience it. As I began my thoughts this morning, I began talking of one of whom it might be said: ‘Oh, he/she enjoys bad health.’ But then, as I said, we need to 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. Maybe one of the greatest gifts we can receive, one of the greatest gifts we can give is presence; someone who notices, someone who draws alongside.

In a simple act of presence, of noticing someone in their inner pain or isolation, in a simple act of speaking, we can encounter them in their personal Bethesda and bring something of the grace of God into their place of pity.