

Sunday Sermon: 26 May 2019

Acts 16: 9-15 and John 5: 1-9

May the words of my mouth and the mediations of all our hearts be acceptable to you, O Lord, our Rock and Redeemer. Amen.

Today, in our bible reading, we have the simple story of Jesus healing. And I want to use this story to reflect and speak into the situation we find ourselves, here at St Peter's. For we are in great need of healing at St Peter's and Jesus is offering us this gift.

Our Gospel passage begins in Jerusalem, at the Sheep Pool, which was surrounded by five colonnades. The pool was not used for sheep – archaeological excavation has show that it was too deep. Rather it was a small swimming pool, set below street level, taking advantage of both rainwater and underground water sources. The pool, also known as Bethesda, was used by Jews and Pagans alike as a place of healing. The waters of the pool would periodically bubble up, and when that happened, the first person to get in was healed.

Thus on this Saturday Jesus came across a man who had been waiting for healing for 38years. Paralysed. Jesus knew the man had been lying between the pillars for a very long time. Jesus asked him; **'Do you want to be healed?'** and the man replied; **'Sir, I have no one to help me into the pool when the water is stirred. While I am trying to get in, someone else goes down ahead of me.'**

The healing waters it appears, were not very successful. The man Jesus came across had made a life for himself, lying by the pool, in his long wait for healing. Jesus' question comes across as quite pointed. *Do you really want to get better? Or are you happy eking out your days lounging around the pool with the feeble excuse someone else always gets there first?* The paralysed man was just that. Paralysed, almost institutionalised. So habituated to his way of life, that he could no longer wait in expectation and readiness for the waters to stir. Why be bothered to keep your eyes peeled for the first sign of movement, when you know you will be beaten to the prize? The disabled man was stuck.

Likewise, I think that St Peter's is a bit stuck at the moment, although, fortunately not for 38 years, yet. As most of you will know, I was appointed as the part time Team Vicar for St Peter's for a two year interim period. Combining four days a week in parish with two days a week as Chaplain to Leicester Grammar School. In practice that has worked out as three days a week each in term time, and focusing full time on the parish during the school holidays, such as half term next week.

When I was appointed we had hoped and I had hoped, that the part time Vicaring would only be temporary, and at the end of the two years, my position could become full time again. But unfortunately this is not meant to be. In March, Archdeacon Richard, advised the DCC that the 2020 Deanery Plan would be maintained in our benefice, thus the clergy allocation for St Peter's going forward will be on a part time basis. I don't have time in my sermon this morning to explain it all fully, so please ask Don, or myself, or one of the DCC for clarification if you need it.

In the midst of this I think we have got a bit stuck. Stuck with our anger and frustration at 'the diocese' for not giving us what we think we need or deserve. Stuck in the past with what St Peter's used to be, with our Team Rector, training curacies, associate priests, pioneer ministers and supporting potential priests as they explored a vocation to ordination. Stuck with trying to persuade 'the diocese' to change

their mind. Like the sick man beside the pool, we have resigned ourselves to eking out our days, complaining when other people get their first. Moaning about the investment into Resourcing Church or Pioneer Ministers or The Community of the Tree of Life.

The reality is, that we are unlikely to get a full time Priest for St Peter's – as the money in the diocesan budget is just not there. Nationally and locally giving is down, and the Church Commissioners are changing the way they allocate funds to dioceses. St Peter's is being asked to do, what many other churches in Leicestershire and across the country have already done. Implement in this area our share of reducing parish clergy resources.

I am sure that over the last few weeks, you have heard talk of reducing or withholding part or all of our parish gift. The money we give each year, to support ministry in the diocese, locally here in Oadby and across every community in Leicestershire. I personally think that this is very dangerous talk. Reducing our gift, is not going to get us a full time vicar. Rather it will just reduce the resources available for ministry in Oadby and in other places in the diocese that also desperately need ministry support.

We also need to think theologically as well as practically about the money God gives to us as St Peter's. Look at the language I am using. That of gift. Parish gift is just that, a gift from St Peter's to the wider church. Funds held in common to be put to God's work, whatever and wherever that might be.

The money we use each year to run the church, pay our staff, maintain the buildings, comes from the generous gifts that each of us make. In our weekly envelope in the collection plate, or in my case, my monthly standing order. Each of us is able to give generously, because God gave to us first. This money is not ours at St Peter's. It's God's. Therefore to speak of 'cutting our parish gift' smacks of pettiness and spite. As opposed to love and generosity. Recognising that God is generous in his gift to us and we give in response to his love.

For God had an amazing gift for the paralysed man lying prone by the sheep pool. Jesus did not, as the man might have expected, help him into the pool. Instead Jesus offered the disabled man a different opportunity. Jesus commanded the man to; **'Stand up, take your mat and walk. At once the man was made well, and he took up his mat and began to walk.'**

Likewise, God is offering us at St Peter's another opportunity. We are not going to be crippled by only having a part time vicar. For here in Oadby we are one of four parishes that are central to a funding application that has recently been made to the Church Commissioners. This is to explore intercultural worship. How Christians of different cultural backgrounds, with different mother tongues, different experiences of doing church, worship together. Take a moment to look at the faces around you – go on take a look...

What do you see... I see mostly people of a similar age, ethnicity and cultural experience. Yet God's church should be full of people of different ages, backgrounds and colour. In Oadby, with our multi cultural community we are ideally placed for this. And we have begun that work, by prioritising young people and employing Abi. But God is giving us an opportunity to do more. Being part of the intercultural worship experiment will not magically get us a full time vicar. But it will come with extra ministerial resources, which we can invest in God's mission to all his people in this place.

When the paralysed man was obedient to Jesus' command, he was launched into a harder, more satisfying way of life. As he walked away from the porticoes that had been effectively his home for the

last 38 years, he walked straight into a scandal with his fellow Jews about working on the Sabbath. And I am sure he was walking into other challenges. Where would he eat and sleep that night? Where was he going to live and work?

Here at St Peter's we have an opportunity before us. If we grasp the opportunity of intercultural worship, we will be changed and transformed by God, and grow as new people join us at St Peter's. This opportunity will be difficult, challenging and painful. For to truly embrace intercultural worship, new folk, will not change, to become like us, the existing family of St Peter's. Rather we will be changed. And God will transform us all together. As the people of God.

So this morning, I am going to pose us a question. How are we going to respond to Jesus' command? Do we want to be healed? Are we going to stay as we are now, lying by a questionable source of help, getting sicker and sicker? Blaming our woes on other people? Or are we going to pick up our mats and walk? Walk into a future, where all God's people consider St Peter's to be their church.

Amen.