

Healing and Hope

John 5: 1-9

Acts 16:9-15

Revelation 21.10, 22-22:5

Thirty eight years. I wonder what you were doing 38 years ago? It was May 1984. Margaret Thatcher was Prime Minister. The Miners' strike was dominating the headlines and the country. I'm told that at the end of May, the Queen opened a new terminal at Birmingham Airport; and on 6th July Rev Dr David Jenkins, considered by some to hold dubious theological opinions, was consecrated as Bishop of Durham in a service at York Minster. Three days later fire broke out in the Minster roof, causing millions of pounds worth of damage, and many to wonder whether an "act of God" was more than just a get-out clause in an insurance policy.

And Wham! had entered the charts at number 4 with what turned out to be an enduring hit "Wake me up before you go go."

Doesn't it all make you glad you were alive then!

No doubt for many of you, like me, it kind of feels like yesterday. And kind of not. A lot of things have happened since then. A lot of life has been lived.

Think then of the unfortunate man in the gospel story we have just read. Thirty-eight years is the length of time he has been ill. And in a time when life expectancy wasn't much more than that, it's pretty much a lifetime that he's been waiting there by this pool. The scholars tell us that this site had been a place of healing for a long time and for various religions. The story went that an angel would stir up the waters, and the first person to get into the pool would be miraculously healed. Hence the man's response to Jesus that other people always reached the pool before he did.

His words sound so defensive and world-weary that I can't help but feel that we are listening to a man who has lost hope. Lost hope that anything can ever improve. All he can do is just accept whatever life throws at him and keep on surviving for as long as he can.

And actually, in some senses, I have to say I do rather empathise with this guy. The pandemic, the lockdowns, the uncertainty, has changed many things, and

some days it just all seems very, very hard. And I totally recognise that many have far more to cope with than I do – advancing age, frailty, bereavement and more.

And yet Jesus says to this hope-less man, “Stand up, take up your mat, and walk.”

And he does.

Healing and Hope.

In the reading from Acts we meet some other people who are going through difficult times. Paul and his companions are feeling frustrated because although they want to get out there and share the Good News of Jesus, it seems like all the doors are slamming in their faces.

And the mysterious “man of Macedonia’ who appears to Paul in a dream is clearly asking for help. (Macedonia is what we now know as the northern part of Greece; Troas was on the west coast of what is modern-day Turkey.)

So Paul and his companions sail off, and, ending up in Philippi, head on down to the river bank– the traditional meeting place for Jews and God-worshipping non-Jews in places where there wasn’t a synagogue – and there they find the small number of locals who worship God. More water.

And they preach the Good News of Jesus, and people respond by accepting Jesus as their Lord, and being baptised. The first Christians in what we now know as Europe.

Another type of Healing and Hope – this time the healing of the relationships between God and those who respond; and the eternal hope which this brings.

And so to Revelation. John’s Vision of God making all things new, as he has promised.

Not, as we might sometimes think, of God wiping out the Creation, and us all going off to sit on fluffy white heavenly clouds playing harps...

But of heaven coming down to earth, and all being made new.

Of God and his people living together in perfect harmony again.

As Louise said last week - No separation. Like in the Garden of Eden – but now in the heavenly city through which flows the water of the river of life, And on its banks the tree of life – with its leaves, for healing.

Water. Healing. And Hope.

And this is our hope. Christian hope.

Not hope in the sense of “I hope it will be sunny tomorrow” – a kind of wish or aspiration

But more of a promise. Something we are waiting for, but which is sure to happen.

Back to the man in the gospel, waiting by the pool.

And that question Jesus puts to him.

“Do you want to be made well?”

Do you want to be healed?

Do you want to have hope again? Real hope? Eternal hope?

He offers him the choice.

Or maybe it’s better to say that he shows to the man that there is a choice.

He doesn’t have to remain as he is – hopeless, and stuck, and barely living life at all

There is another option.

And if he wants to take the other option – of hope; of healing, of freedom from what is holding him back; of living a new kind of fulfilling life

Then all he has to do is trust in what Jesus says to him, and (literally) take the first step.

And what of us?

What holds us back? Not just physically, in our bodies. But in our minds, our hearts and our souls - mentally, emotionally, spiritually?

What is stopping us from living more fully? Of living in the light of God’s healing and God’s hope?

Maybe it's just that, like the man in the story, we have had so many years of disappointment that we cannot even imagine what a fuller life might look like? That we have come to focus on what we can't do, rather than on what we can.

Perhaps it's exactly the opposite, that the past was so good that instead of becoming a happy memory which nourishes us for the future, it becomes an impossible golden age which the present can never live up to – and in some ways holds us back.

Or maybe it's fear. Fear of the future, spoiling our present. Or fear that we can't do it.

And yet, Jesus still offers us the same healing and hope that he offered to the man. Hope for now. Hope for eternity.

And here's the thing. It's not just a one-off offer.

It's not just that we decide and declare that Jesus is our Lord, and then he just leaves us to get on with it.

Every single day, he poses the same question to each of us as he posed to the man. "Do you want to....?"

It is up to us to decide if we, too, will trust him enough to let him help us with what is holding us back. To heal us, and give us hope.

Up to us to decide if we trust him enough to take the next step into experiencing living life more fully.

Of experiencing the reality of God's love and peace; freedom and joy each and every day

We don't have to wait until we die.

The offer is there today.

"Do you want to...?" asks Jesus.

Do we trust him enough to say, "yes"?