

Sermon for Sunday 22 May 2022

I am certain that you will all have seen the Trust Power advert on the TV that it seems melts the hearts of many New Zealanders each time it is viewed. I am sure you know the one to which I refer. Meant to be together it says. The man who visits his wife's grave and then drives past the animal shelter on his way home, stops, and goes in looking for a companion. He chooses the three legged dog, Blue, among all the others looking for a loving home. The man himself is an amputee. And we see them enjoying time at the beach. I have to confess that I was rather slow, I had viewed that advert several times, and it was only when my work colleagues were discussing the advert that I realised the man was an amputee!! I concentrated more on the fact that the man chose the three legged dog among all the other possible choices without looking at him noticing his own leg or lack of.

Paul is in his early thirties and has diabetes. He was diagnosed while overseas as an older teenager. He learned to inject himself with insulin but these days he wears an insulin pump under his clothing. He monitors his blood sugar levels using the latest equipment available. Paul is a teacher at a primary school, he referees rugby and he is very social. He is married to Helen who is also a teacher. Eighteen months ago they bought their first home.

Historically in nursing we cared for patients according to their illness. "The appendicectomy in room 7", kind of thing. Today we talk about, and teach patient or person centred care. This means that the patient is at the centre of the care rather than the illness. We don't say "the diabetic patient." Or say "the diabetic nurse." Instead we say the person or the patient who has diabetes. The person isn't defined by their illness. They are still the same person, with an illness. The person is the focus and then the illness. We don't say "the diabetic nurse". While the nurse may have diabetes, they most probably do not. We say "the nurse who cares for people who have diabetes."

Patient or person centred care is part of the course that I teach. I put up a slide of a young woman preparing for a swimming race. She has a real look of determination on her face. She also has very broad strong shoulders. Down beside her is her artificial leg. The point of the slide is that we are not automatically drawn first to the

artificial leg. We are first drawn to the person and then to the illness, disease or disability.

And so this morning we hear the following: I have had this chronic illness for thirty eight years. I can't get around and haven't been able to for so long! I just sit on this mat all day and night. I have been coming to this pool along with many others with all manner of ailments and we are all hoping to be made well. Some are blind, some lame, and still others who are paralysed. This pool has five porches but so few of us are healed. Only the fastest get healed..... it is just so unfair!

Jesus is here once again. It is the Sabbath. Perhaps I will get lucky this time and attract his attention amidst the crowd of the unwell. It is hard to attract anyone's attention lying here. I just fail to get noticed. It is all just so difficult, everything is such a challenge, daily life, simply getting up each morning, finding the motivation to go on. I get depressed about my situation. I am not able to meet with and talk to friends. My spirit is crushed. My disability defines me and just who I am!

I am in luck, Jesus has noticed me. Terrific! I am in with a real chance! Jesus comes over and asks me: "Do you want to get well?" What are you thinking Jesus? What kind of question is that? Isn't it obvious?

I reply "Sir, I have no one to help me into the pool when the water is stirred up. While I am doing my very best to get into the water, someone else gets there first."

Jesus says to me, "Get up, pick up your mat, and walk." And what do you know, I picked up the mat and began to walk! Amazing! I am healed! The Spirit took control of me and the angel carried me to the top of a very high mountain. Once there I saw the light of Christ! There shall be no more dark, and I will not need a lamp or sunlight because the Lord will be my light (Revelation 21:10 and 22:5).

Thirty-eight years is a long time to sit on a mat. Watching, waiting and hoping for healing. Not a lot changes. Sitting on the mat has become a way of life and it fills every thought and minute of the day. The man wakes and goes to sleep thinking about his circumstances. Life is stagnant and standing still. The man cannot see the deep well of life within him. He is convinced that life will bubble up outside of him over in that magic pool of water. So he simply sits on his mat watching, waiting and hoping that things will change from the outside.

There was a belief that this pool of water called Beth-saida had real healing properties and that it could change a person's life. It was said that every now and then an angel would stir the water, that water would then begin to bubble, and the first person in the water would be healed. The man we hear about today will not get up off his mat until he sees that first bubble. And then with the time it takes him he is never first to get to and then in to the bubbling water. He is living an 'as soon as" life.

The pool of Beth-saida is simply an illusion. It is to convince the man and us that life is no more than our circumstances. Those circumstances control us. Its aim is to deceive us in to thinking that life is to be found outside of ourselves, and not from deep within. We are being tricked in to living a "as soon as" life. We know how it goes. We say to ourselves or loudly to our family or friends: as soon as this or that happens everything will be better. I will then be happy or my problems will go away. I will then be satisfied. All will be well.

The pool of Beth-saida is very attractive to us as it was to the man we hear about this morning. As children we say: "as soon as I get big, I grow up, when I am an adult....." It continues through our life, as soon as..... I get a better job, I lose weight, I save this amount of money, I have a holiday, I have time and so on. There will always be another as soon as..... In the meantime life has been put on hold, the pause button has been pushed. We sit on our mat, imprisoned, controlled by our circumstances.

The man we hear about this morning is so imprisoned that when Jesus asks if he wants to be made well the man doesn't reply in a very favourable way. He doesn't say "yes, thank you very much, I would be so grateful." Instead he is wrapped up in his circumstances and excuses. "I have no one to put me into the water, or by the time they do I have missed out on the bubbles."

Our circumstances are important. Our lives though, are more than our circumstances. Life is found within those circumstances. A new approach and way forward is found from within.

Jesus doesn't simply help the man to get in to the water. He comes to him on his mat, the same mat, the mat of circumstances, the man wants to escape. Jesus speaks words of life and resurrection. "Stand up, take your mat and walk." The mat

and so his circumstances, go with him. They are part of him although not the whole part. His circumstances are real. The circumstances don't carry him, he carries them.

Jesus doesn't carry our outer circumstances. He changes us. He calls us to a new way of being, seeing, acting, speaking and thinking. When we stand and rise to that new life we discover the circumstances have somehow changed. That doesn't necessarily make life easy or mean we no longer have to deal with the circumstances of life. It makes our circumstances more manageable and we engage with them from a different place and position. The pool of Beth-saida no longer has power over us. The imprisonment is taken over by a new freedom. Apathy gives way to creativity. Stagnant waters now bubble with new life from within.

The life Jesus offers does not happen "as soon as." It happens in the midst of the circumstances, in this place, at this time. Are we sitting on our mat? Are we looking for a pool of Beth-saida? Jesus says to us: "Stand up, take your mat, and walk."

We all have our own mat of circumstances. Perhaps a chronic illness like the man we hear about, family disharmony, the death of a friend, loss of a job, break up of a relationship, financial stresses. We are under the power of those circumstances. They control us.

Jesus offers us new life. With this new life we are in control and we hold the power. We are able to manage what is happening in our life and have a different attitude and approach. We might even reflect on and learn from our circumstances and take that learning forward with deepening faith. It is not what happens to us that is important but what we learn from that happening and how it affects and 'grows' our faith in Christ.

Jesus offers us resurrection life in the light of his own resurrection. Within this life our circumstances are part of it but they do not have power over us. We are not defined by those circumstances. Through faith in Christ we manage our circumstances. They remain part of us, part of our past. We carry the learning from those circumstances and move forward. That present and the future are in the light of Christ's resurrection.

Jesus says “pick up your mat and walk!” With faith and in faith we move forward in and with the resurrection light of Christ. Our circumstances are part of us although they do not control us, they help shape us and our faith in God.

AMEN