

SUNDAY OF THE PARALYTIC



GOSPEL LESSON - John 5:1-15

The pool of Bethesda mentioned in the Gospel lesson was 100 yards from the Temple area near the Sheep Gate and was used for washing the sacrificial lambs before they were slain. This means that quite a few sheep got washed in this pool. One thousand sheep passed through this pool per year just from the morning and evening offering, the Sabbath offering and the first of the month offering (Numbers 28:1-11). At the dedication of the Temple, Solomon offered 120,000 sheep over the course of one week (1 Kings 8:63), and they all were probably washed in this pool of Bethesda. Figuring at least 10,000 sheep per year as an average, the pool of Bethesda may not have been as clean and crystal clear as a Southern California backyard swimming pool. This may explain why the lame and paralyzed were sitting around the pool and not in the pool.

With many sheep passing through the pool of Bethesda, there had to be an organized effort and various captive industries to support it. For example, the shepherds who were keeping watch over their flocks by night (Luke 2:8-21) when Jesus was born were part of this industry. Their flocks were in the queue for the sacrifices in Jerusalem.

The old city of Jerusalem had an extensive and intricate underground water system that is still being explored today. Extensive tunnels and underground springs existed. Some people have "explained" the stirring of the water of the pool as being caused by the hydraulic effects of intermittencies in the underground springs. The close connection of the pool to the Temple and the Presence of God (in the Holy of Holies) makes the angelic explanation in v.4 quite plausible

also. One can expect to see a lot of angelic activity in the Presence of God. (Compare John 1:51, Psalm 91:11-12). Some have attributed the "stirring" of the Pool of Bethesda to the Archangel Raphael.

Jesus' first remarks to the paralytic of our Gospel lesson are puzzling. The Lord asked him simply, "Do you want to be healed?" The man had been there for 38 years waiting for an opportunity to be the first one in the water after the angel stirred it. But every time the stirring occurred, someone else beat him into the water. Since he was laying on a bed as opposed to sitting up, he may have been a quadriplegic as opposed to a paraplegic (i.e. paralyzed neck down versus waist down). In other words, he may not have been able to move at all since he needed "a man to put me into the pool" (v.7).

The Lord in our eyes may have been asking a curious question, "Do you want to be healed?" Some people prefer to be infirm in some way so that others will take care of them, or so that they can avoid their responsibilities. It's a little like staying home "sick" on the day of a big final exam or on the day of a big confrontation at work.

In verse 6, the Lord asked: "Do you want to be healed?" In verse 14, He said: "See, you have been healed. Sin no more lest a worse thing come upon you!" The only time Jesus was recorded as using a similar phrase was in His final words to the woman caught in the act of adultery by the Scribes and Pharisees: "Neither do I condemn you; go and sin no more" (John 8:10-11). We don't usually think of a poor helpless cripple as being a sinner, but perhaps there was more to it than that. Everything depended on the condition of his heart which the Lord can see and we can't.

The "worse thing" that Jesus referred to is illustrated in Luke 11:24-26. There, Jesus described what happens when someone is healed and cleaned out. Once cleaned out, if a man does not have the Holy Spirit guarding his dwelling (i.e., his heart and soul) someone stronger than he (i.e., the demons) will overcome him (Luke 11:21-22). When they do, they will bring with them other demons that are stronger and even more evil such that the last state of the man will be worse than the first.

This healing of the paralytic had some major repercussions since it was done on the Sabbath (John 5:1, 9). The Laws concerning the Sabbath were very strict.

But also tied in to the Sabbath observation was a recalling of the time Israel was being "worked to death" in Egypt (Deuteronomy 5:15). Thus, the Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath (Mark 2:27). But it was also a holy day (Exodus 16:23; 20:11; 31:15), and a day of gladness (Numbers 10:10). On this day, the daily offering was doubled (four lambs versus two, see Numbers 28:3-15) and the bread was set out in the Holy Place (Leviticus 24:8) before the Lord. The Sabbaths were also to be a sign (or omen) between Israel and God "that they might know that I am the Lord who sanctifies them" (Ezekiel 20:12, 20).

In the true spirit of the Sabbath, Jesus did a number of healings on the Sabbath. For example:

- The paralytic (today's Gospel) John 5:9
- A man with a withered hand Matthew 12:10; Mark 3:2; Luke 6:7
- The man born blind (Gospel for 6th Sunday of Pascha) John 9:14
- The woman bent over (Gospel for 10th Sunday of Luke) Luke 13:14
- A man with dropsy Luke 14:3

When the Scribes and Pharisees criticized Jesus for these things -- saying that He was working on the Sabbath -- Jesus replied: that mercy, not sacrifice was to be the spirit of the Sabbath (Matthew 12:7, Hosea 6:6).

Following today's Gospel lesson, Jesus had some discussions with the Jewish leaders where He spoke to them about how He was just doing His Father's work (John 5:17; 19-47). Therefore, the Jewish leaders had two counts against Him: one for breaking the Sabbath and another for making Himself equal with God (John 5:18). Both were capital offenses under Mosaic Law (Leviticus 24:10-23).

There are two paradoxes in all this: First, the Jewish leaders had such heartache with Jesus doing good on the Sabbath, when that was what the Sabbath was for. Second, they accused Jesus of blasphemy for (1) claiming to be equal with God (John 5:18; 10:33; 19:7) and (2) forgiving sins which only God can do (Matthew 9:2-3; Luke 5:20-21). Yet they themselves were the real blasphemers when they claimed Jesus cast out demons by the ruler of the demons (Mark 3:20-30; Matthew 12:24-37).

John Chrysostom pointed out some details in this Gospel lesson that are worth considering: sin had been the cause of the Paralytic's condition, for Jesus said, "See, you have been made whole (or healthy). Sin no more, lest a worse thing come upon you" (v.14). Earlier, Jesus began by asking the Paralytic, "Do you want to be made whole (or healthy)?" Yet the Paralytic did not even know Who Jesus was (v.13), never mind believe that He could perform the miracle. On other occasions, Jesus had asked the recipients if they believed He could work the cure (Matthew 9:28). In this case, then, He healed the Paralytic before he exhibited any faith.

Once cured, however, Chrysostom pointed out that the former Paralytic showed evidence of a rekindled faith. For example: (1) He immediately got up and walked without mocking or questioning or doubting. (2) He obeyed Jesus in carrying his bed, even though in violation of the Sabbath Laws. (3) When challenged by the Jewish leaders about breaking the Sabbath Laws, he referred to an obviously higher authority Who told him to do so. (4) In spite of the harassment of the Jewish leaders, the former Paralytic went straight to the Temple, "which is an indication of his great piety. For he departed not into the market places, nor gave himself up to luxury and

ease, but remained in the Temple although about to sustain a violent attack and to be harassed by all there."

Chrysostom also pointed out that Jesus concealed Himself after the healing (v.13). Why? "First, that while He was absent, the testimony of the man might be unsuspected, for he who now felt himself whole was a credible witness of the benefit. Second, that He might not cause the fury of the Jews to be yet more inflamed, for the sight of One whom they envy is wont to kindle not a small spark in malicious persons. On this account He retired, and left the deed by itself to plead its cause among them." Chrysostom went on to say that envy disables the eyes of the soul and endangers the salvation of him who is possessed by it (Homily xxxvi on John 5).

Delving more deeply into the sin that was the cause of the paralysis, Chrysostom stated that when the soul is diseased, we often feel no pain. "Therefore, God oftentimes punishes the body for the transgressions of the soul, so that by means of the scourging of the inferior part, the better part also may receive some healing." But yet "this man had not sinned for as many years as he suffered (he was paralyzed for 38 years, v.5), for he had spent a whole lifetime in the length of his punishment. For sins are not judged by time but by the nature of the transgression... Besides this, we may see another thing, that though we have suffered severely for former sins; if we afterwards fall into the same, we shall suffer much more severely. And with good reason; for he who is not made better even by punishment, is afterwards led as insensible and as a despiser to still heavier chastisement. The fault should of itself be sufficient to check and to render more sober the man who once has slipped; but when not even the addition of punishment effects this, he naturally requires more bitter torments."

"What then, says one, 'do all diseases proceed from sin?' Not all, but most of them; and some proceed from different kinds of loose living since gluttony, intemperance and sloth produce such like sufferings. But the one rule we have to observe is to bear every stroke thankfully, for they are sent because of our sins."

Chrysostom also pointed out that Jesus did not say, "Behold you have suffered a sufficient punishment for your sins"; but, "Behold you have been made whole. Sin no more..." (v.14). For He declared not to him that he was delivered after suffering the deserved amount of punishment, but that through lovingkindness he was made whole. Also, by saying "sin no more...", He revealed His Divinity and showed that He knew all the transgressions that had been formerly committed by him (Homily xxxvii on John 5).

Many people today are in the same condition as the paralytic. We are all paralyzed by sin to varying degrees; but the lesson here is that we should never give up hope. The Lord is aware of our own unique situations. If even the hairs of our head are all numbered (Matthew 10:29-31) and not one of them falls without our Father's knowledge (Luke 21:16-19), certainly He is aware of our infirmities and has allowed them in order to strengthen our faith. For it is by our patience that we possess our souls (Luke 21:19; 1 Corinthians 9:24; Hebrews 12:1).