

Do you want to get well?

It's a strange question, isn't it? Do you want to get well?

The answer is obvious. Yes, of course I want to get well. So why ask it?

That's the question that Jesus asked the man in today's reading from John's gospel.

So let me ask you, different, but similar questions:

Do you want to get fitter? Do you want to manage your finances better? Do you want to read more? Do you want to know the bible better? Do you want to make new friends? Do you want to invite people to church?

The answers should all be yes, shouldn't they? They're "no brainers".

And yet, for all of us, the answer isn't always yes. We don't get fitter, we don't manage our finances properly, we don't read all that much, or the bible often at all, and we don't seem to make many new friends.

These things that we want, these things that should definitely be "Yes"s, all take effort, and there's so much going on in our lives. In the world.

As much as we might want our answers to be yes, things come up: all sorts of distractions, all sorts of things take priority. But we try – we employ personal trainers, financial managers, dieticians and so on to help us. And more extremely, people are often drawn to shortcuts – get rich quick schemes, snake-oil cures, diet pills and anabolic steroids.

I think we've all heard the saying "God helps those who help themselves" a thousand times or more. But that phrase doesn't appear anywhere in the bible – although many people (over 80% of Christians in some surveys) think it does.

Today's reading from John's gospel takes place in Jerusalem at the pool near the sheep gate. The pool is called Bethesda and it's a place where the sick and the disabled gathered – people who were less than perfect, physically; people

who had to beg for a living and those who relied on others to care for them. People who were ashamed of their appearance, or their illness or their disability or their reliance on others.

But Bethesda was also a place of hope, because there was – they believed – the possibility of healing.

John's gospel tells us that the pool was surrounded by five covered colonnades – it sounds a very grand place, until you read on a bit and think about it.

John tells us that “Here a great number of disabled people used to lie – the blind, the lame, [and] the paralysed” all in the hope of healing by being the first into the pool when the waters stirred”.

This was of course long before chlorination and filtration. The waters would have been murky, if not stagnant. There is some thought it was fed by an underground stream – hence the stirring of the waters sometime – but it would have collected runoff from the streets of Jerusalem, not to mention the five colonnades of disabled people.

And there were all these people, in various stages of distress and need and squalor, gathered around this pool desperately waiting for the waters to stir, and then desperately trying to be the first into the water when they did.

You might have noticed in the reading that there was no verse 4 – our modern translations go straight from verse 3 to verse 5 – but there has been, historically a verse 4, which is often included as a footnote, which comes to us only from a handful of manuscripts, and is generally thought to have been inserted by later copyists to explain why the people gathered in large numbers seeking healing, and verse 4 says: *“From time to time an angel of the Lord would come down and stir up the waters. The first one into the pool after each such disturbance would be cured of whatever disease they had.”*

The people gathered seeking healing clearly believed something was at work in the waters of the pool. Maybe there had been a miraculous healing at some point, maybe some disease had naturally run its course and someone began associating their ‘cure’ with bathing in the pool when the waters stirred. We

don't know – and maybe the people gathered at the pool didn't know either – but they certainly wanted the chance to be healed.

Once a rumour gets started it's hard to stop it. After all, how could so many people gathered for healing be wrong about it?

In today's reading, Jesus arrives at Bethesda, and approaches a man who was ill, who had been paralysed for thirty-eight years. He was a beggar – he had a mat – and would have made a living from what others gave him. He may have paid people to bring him food and have others take care of his other needs. At one level, life for this man may have been stable and more or less tolerable. There were of course no social services, but there was a tradition amongst the Jewish people of charity – of giving to those in need.

I wouldn't go so far as to say life for an invalid beggar would have been good or even comfortable, but it would have been stable – after all, we know he's been in this condition for thirty-eight years.

When Jesus saw him lying there and learned that he had been in this condition for a long time, he asked him, "Do you want to get well?" (5:6)

On the surface it's a ridiculous question. It would be like asking someone if they want food when they're hungry, or if they want water if they were thirsty, or if they want a blanket if they were cold.

But before we say "Of course", maybe it's not such an easy question to answer.

There's a scene in Monty Python's *Life of Brian* where Michael Palin bounces along saying "Penny for an ex-Leper". When Brian questions him, he explains he's lost his income source since Jesus cured him of leprosy. It's an apparently ludicrous joke, but perhaps – perhaps – it does have a basis in the reality of the time. All that this man had done all his life, was beg.

Maybe, the answer isn't as easy as we first think.

And we are asked the same question — "Do you want to get well?" Again, this sounds crazy to us, at least at first thought. Of course we want to be made well. But often we need to take action. Sometimes we need to trust others. Sometimes we need to give up habits or things we're attached to.

There hasn't been a child go through school for more than fifty years now that hasn't learned how bad smoking is for their health. So there should be no smokers under sixty or so, right?

Or go to the beach on a summer day and see the people suntanning. Or those that don't bother wearing safety glasses when they use an angle grinder.

It should be easy enough, shouldn't it? Just like it should be easy enough to stop trying to solve all the problems of the world and our lives ourselves and turn to God.

Because Jesus, has given all people the chance to be made well. Not to be instantly cured of a disease or a disability, but to be made fundamentally well. To be reconciled with God, by Jesus' own death on the cross. To be made right with God.

Whatever our problems are, we have good news, we have hope: Jesus said, "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light." (Matthew 11:28-30)

This is not to say that every problem will be fixed in this world. Jesus clearly said that we will have trouble in this world. But he can help us through all the problems of life – all our trials and tribulations - if we trust in Him.

<pause>

In response to being asked if he wants to be made well, the man at the pool tells Jesus everything he does to try and get well, and why it doesn't work: "*...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.*" (5:7)

It's a strange situation, when you think about it. There's a miraculous healing on offer – but the healing (if there really is one - and there probably isn't) goes to the quickest. Or the strongest. Or the one who can afford the most helpers. In short, it goes to the one who needs it least.

I have no doubt that there would have been plenty of pushing and shoving, elbowing and trampling.

Can you imagine what it would be like in a modern emergency ward if it worked on the same principle as the pool at Bethesda? The doctor would come to the door of the waiting room and say "Next". And the first person to get to him or her would be the next treated. If you're lying on the floor clutching your chest in the throes of a heart attack, you'll be out of luck, because someone who's cut their finger with a carving knife will run to the doctor. If you've got a broken leg, you'll lose out to someone who can hobble on a sprained ankle. And so on.

It would just be wrong.

Interestingly, in this reading, the man doesn't ask Jesus for healing. In fact, there's no indication that the man had any idea at all who Jesus was – or any idea that Jesus would be able to cure him.

But when Jesus hears the man's description of what he does do to try and get well, Jesus' response isn't to help the man into the pool the next time the water is stirred. And his response isn't to organise the crowd by the pool in such a way as to make it fairer, by prioritising people based on their need or on time they'd been waiting.

Instead, Jesus' response is to bypass the pool entirely.

The man is instantly made well. And instantly, his life is changed. Jesus said to him "Get up! Pick up your mat and walk" (5:8), and we read that "At once the man was cured; he picked up his mat and walked." (5:9).

Usually, the gospel accounts of Jesus' healings emphasise that faith is needed. In Mark's gospel, the haemorrhagic woman was cured, Jesus said clearly "Daughter, your faith has healed you", (Mark 5:34), and when he healed blind Bartimaeus, Jesus said "Go, your faith has healed you" (Mark 10:52), but here, in John's gospel there is no expression of faith from the man, and no indication from Jesus that the man's faith had anything to do with it.

The man didn't do anything to earn his healing. He didn't even ask for it. His healing was a free gift from Jesus.

Jesus usually healed in response to faith, but he is certainly not limited by lack of faith, or even the absence of faith. So today, when we pray for people, we pray for all people – or at least we should pray for all people, not just Christians.

In his healing, this man's life was changed. Jesus told him to take up his mat and walk, and at once – instantaneously – the man was cured. Having not walked for 38 years, he stood up and walked. And he picked up his mat, too, the symbol of his place in society – a beggar's mat.

His life was changed. He would have to find work. And somewhere to live. And start paying taxes. He might even find someone to love and to love him. No longer would his life be spent lying under the covered colonnades at the pool at Bethesda, among the diseased and disabled. No longer would he be trying to fight his way to be first into the pool.

And so it is with us: When we are made well. When we are saved. When we turn to Jesus, and put our trust in him, our lives are changed. Necessarily changed in response to God's grace. No longer do we need to try to solve the problems of this world for ourselves. And no longer do we rely on the things of this world: When we put our trust in Jesus, we stand up, we pick up our metaphorical mats, and we walk. But now, we walk with Jesus.

The call for each person is to use the faith that God has placed in our heart, soul, and mind and go into the world doing good things in the name of Jesus, being witnesses to him to the ends of the earth. We know it won't always be easy, because there's pressure that others will place on us, there's all the

distractions and temptations of the world, but Jesus has promised he will never, ever fail us. He will never forget us.

Jesus told the man at the pool was told to do three things -- stand up, take up his mat, and walk.

That man had been disabled for 38 years, he would probably have doubted his ability to even stand, let alone walk. "I can't get up. I've been unable to walk for 38 years." But Jesus says in effect, "You can, because I say so."

And Jesus also tells him to pick up his mat. Not to leave it there and walk away from it, but to pick it up - because there's no chance this man is coming back. He's not leaving his mat reserving his place at the pool so he can come back tomorrow.

He isn't coming back to the pool because he has been healed. He's been changed. It's time for something different for him. Something new. And something better.

It's the same with us. When we put our trust in Jesus – we are changed. It's time for something different. Something new. And something better. No longer do we rely on the things of this world.

And not only are we called to stand up and pick up our mats – whatever they may be – but we are also called to walk. To walk with in God's ways. To follow Jesus.

I'm fond of the quote from Timothy Keller, "God sees us as we are, loves us as we are, and accepts us as we are. But by his grace, he does not leave us as we are."

It won't always be easy: Jesus said "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me." (Luke 9:23)

[But] wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it. (Matt 7:13-14)

It is the road that leads to life. And it's God's desire that we all find that road.

We live our lives in a world that is much like that crowd at Bethesda, with people struggling to be first into the water, fighting each other to get ahead. As followers of Christ, we must follow Jesus' command to stand up, to not be like those struggling, to be assured of salvation through the death and resurrection of Christ – to pick up our mats – and walk. To walk with each other, and to walk with Jesus.

Amen.