

**ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE
WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON**

Reflection – 6th Sunday of Easter – 22nd May 2022

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'This isn't how the story ends'

Have you ever read a good book? And have you read it late into the night and you can't put it down? And is it because you want to know how the story ends? Will they discover the murderer? Will the couple fall in love?

It's a natural reaction to want to know how a story ends. Even looking at our world today, how will the Ukraine situation end, how will Covid end, will Brexit *ever* end?

Sometimes these stories are so familiar we switch off when they are being read. Sometimes we think we know how the story will end, then we are surprised...

The healing at the pool in Bethesda is a well-known story in John's gospel. It describes how Jesus comes across a sick man at the pool by the Sheep Gate, who has been waiting for many years for the waters to be stirred up, so he can get into the water and be healed.

But he is never quick enough, and he has no friends to help him. Each time somebody else gets there first. They are not just carried in, but using the Greek word, literally thrown into the water by their friends. That's how you know who your real friends are – choose your friends based on how well they can throw you. It makes the healing sound like a free-for-all, first come, first served.

But the sick man doesn't have friends to help him. So he sits, and waits again for next time. The same story.

And then Jesus comes along, the man believes in him, and is immediately healed. This much we know from John's Gospel.

Except that... the story is not all it seems. There is a lot more happening than we notice at first. Like the pool, this is a story with a lot of depth.

For a start, let's look at the pool, by the Sheep Gate. Well, let's start with the Sheep Gate.

Because actually there is no Sheep Gate. The verse in the Greek refers to five columns, but it doesn't refer to a gate. In fact, the Greek word 'gate' does not appear in the text at all. Some translations talk about the sheep 'market' instead. But 'market' doesn't appear either! And the word for 'sheep' isn't used in conjunction with the word gate – and, even more strangely, the word used only exists here in this verse.

προβατικός - Out of 800.000 words in the Bible, this is the only time we find this word and so we don't even know for sure what it means. It's something to do with sheep, but that's all we know.

The Jewish historian Josephus doesn't even mention this place of supposed healing. The prophet Nehemiah wrote about a sheep gate, but that was 500 years earlier. So I think what has happened is that the earliest New Testament translators have taken the references to five columns, and something to do with sheep and said 'oh yes that must be the sheep gate that Nehemiah was writing about'

And that's what happens in our life sometimes – we see one thing, and we see another thing, and we try to make sense of it all, so we imagine a connection between them. Our brain needs to try to explain things.

So if in the story you've had a picture in your mind of a gate with little fluffy sheep going in and out, sorry to change that picture for you. The story is going to be a little different.

Now, how does this change the way you look at the story? Does it start to raise questions in your mind? It does for me.

Of course those people wanted to be made better. But maybe even more importantly, they wanted to be clean. That's why the pool was outside the holy city, Jerusalem. People who were unwell, or who had a disability, were regarded as ritually unclean and, under the strict laws of cleanliness in Leviticus and Deuteronomy, did not have access to the holiest places unless and until they had

been cleansed of their affliction. So they waited by the pool, day after day, year after year. And they told each other the familiar story that when the water was stirred up, *this* time they would be healed.

But this man did a different thing. In response to Jesus's invitation, he made a leap of a different kind, without knowing where the story ends.

As Christians, we know that the crucifixion is NOT the end of the story – we know about the resurrection. We don't have to know WHY Jesus was resurrected, or HOW. We just need to know THAT he was resurrected. All the other questions we have, we won't get answers for them but that's ok. Some of the early Christian theologians described this as "Faith Seeking Understanding". We have heard these stories many times but we still don't fully understand what was going on. The man didn't ask for his healing by Jesus to wait until he understood fully what was going on. He just accepted, as we all can, that maybe a different outcome is possible.

The others who were waiting at the pool did not recognise Jesus, they continued to wait and then probably lament that they had missed their chance yet again.

This story in John's Gospel reveals the effect Christ can have on people, and it applies to all the areas of our lives that need healing. Every one of us is in need of the wholeness he releases in us. Sometimes we can spend decades metaphorically like the man by the pool, stuck in our sense of helplessness at the circumstances of our lives or past. We all want to hear the words: 'Stand up, take your mat and walk'.

Some people say – "show me something first and I will believe", but people with faith say "I will believe and then things will happen". These are like the two types of people by the pool.

In a recent book by Dr Lisa Miller, scientists can now prove that people who believe in God or a higher power have stronger, more resilient brains and a faster recovery. It's a very recent discovery for scientists but this shouldn't surprise us, it's something that Christians have known for 2000 years.

Jesus' healing is not first come, first served. It is the message of resurrection and it's available to anybody. It's not about who can get to the front of the line first, this is an ever open, *wide* open gate (if I can use that word again!).

There is no formal demand from Jesus, and no formal statement of faith needed before the healing. Jesus doesn't say – "tell everybody that you believe in me and I'll see what I can do for you". And in the same way, there is no record of what the man may have said, just an acknowledgement that he was healed. Even later, when asked by the religious authorities, the man didn't know who Jesus was. That's like us, we don't have to know exactly WHO Jesus is to be healed by him.

The root of the Greek word 'sheep' is προβατων – and that actually has another meaning, not just about sheep – but about people - all moving in a certain direction, all walking the same path – we are all those sheep.

So maybe the story is referring to Jerusalem the heavenly city, not the earthly one "The holy city, the new Jerusalem" as it says in Revelation 21.

Just by opening your heart, by opening your mind, opening them to another ending to the story.

Because suddenly the man can enter Jerusalem, not because he is able to walk, or he is thrown or he is the first one there, but simply because he believes, believes in something that he doesn't need to understand before he accepts it.

And that's the thing to take away today, that when we realise that we don't fully know how the story ends, and we open our hearts to something greater than ourselves, we can take our first steps to being restored in the Risen Christ.

Amen.