

Choice; the man at the pool

Passage: John 5:2-14

Lectionary occasion:
any time.

Dear Reader,
Thank you for choosing my service
I ask you please to leave the sermon and readings as
they are.
The hymns should be OK but all but the first one can be
changed if necessary.
The prayers will get dated - if you can do your own that
would be good.
God bless you.

Choice; The man at the pool

(Hymns & Psalms)

Come in wonder to adore the God of mystery.
 Come in trust to praise the God of love.
 Let all the world worship the God of truth & grace.

Hymn: 256 He is Lord, He is Lord

Prayers

Creating God,
 we marvel at the beauty & order of your world;
 at the variety & uniqueness of creatures & plants & that each has its own place in
 nature's plan.
 Creating God,
 we marvel at the provision you have made for your special creation, humankind. We
 praise you for your many gifts to us, & that we can know you as Mother & Father God.
 Creating God,
 we confess that we have not looked after your world. We have exploited its
 resources & its peoples. Our greed has led to pollution, hunger & injustice.
 Forgive us, we pray, & restore us to our proper place in creation. Teach us the right
 way to live in your world as followers of the Saviour Lord. Amen

Reading: John 5:2-14

139: The kingdom of God

Choices, choices, choices. Life is full of them, some are infinitely more important than others

The most important choices are always when God presents them to us. God called Moses to lead the Israelites out of Egypt & slavery: He had a lot of persuading to do, with a burning bush, a rod turned into a snake & promises of help, but ultimately Mo had the freedom to say yes or no to God. Jesus gave Peter & Andrew a choice; would they follow him or not? They chose to, and their ordinary lives > extraordinary. Saul had followed the strict law-abiding routine of a Pharisee's life before he met the Risen Jesus & made the choice to serve him. - & that choice had a profound effect not only on his own life, but on the history of the world. But it's not only those who go on to do great things who are given life-changing choices.

There was a certain disabled man sitting by the pool at Bethesda - we don't know his name. For 38 yrs his life had followed the same pattern - dependent on others to bring him to the pool in the morning & to come & take him home at night, day after day after day. He no doubt saw the rest of his life continuing in just the same way.

Then along came Jesus & things were never the same again.

That man was given a choice;

He was given a new life;

He was given new responsibility.

He was given a choice.

Jesus asked a question which gave him a choice - did he want life to go on as it had done for so long, or did he want things to change for the better? Jesus asked: **Do you want to get well?** He could've said yes or no. Jesus didn't force healing on him. He was free to choose.

One of the most precious gifts God has given us is our free will, the ability to make choices in our lives: whether it's a question of "What shall I wear today?" or "Do I acknowledge Jesus as Lord of my life, with all that implies?"

With that gracious gift, God's heart aches over so many of the choices we make, just as we may have watched our own children make choices which we knew would lead to unhappiness, whether it's just been buying an outfit which we knew wouldn't suit them, or more seriously making an unwise choice of friends or marriage partner. We have hurt for them, we've probably talked with them & suggested a different course of action - but they've had to choose what to do, & then live with the consequences.

In his love for us, God gives us a choice which allows us the freedom to say no to him. He made us to have a genuine loving relationship with him, not the forced response which comes of fear, nor the response of a puppet which has no mind of its own. He offers nothing less than life in all its fulness, but it is ours to accept & embrace it, That choice does mean, of course, that if we say NO to God in this life, we should expect him to respect our decision in the next. We really don't like that thought, do we? We desperately want to believe that everyone will end up in heaven: yet can we really believe that He'll say: *"Oh, I know you said you didn't want anything to do with me on earth, but never mind, you're coming in anyway."* To do so would deny his very nature of truth & justice & trustworthiness & make a mockery of Jesus' life & death & resurrection.

God loved the world SO MUCH that he sent his own dear Son so that everyone who believes in him should not perish, but have eternal life. That is his great desire for everyone but we all need to make that choice to believe. We are free to say yes or no to him, & however much it hurts him, he respects our decisions.

The man by the pool had a choice

Do you want to get well? Jesus asked him. What a strange question! He'd been sitting there for so long, supposedly waiting to get well. - I mean, he'd have to get a job! Then he'd have to put pennies in other people's hats! He'd actually have to become responsible for his own life, not just wait to be carried round at other people's convenience. He'd have to make decisions about what to do, where to go - & after 38 yrs of inertia, that would be quite a daunting task.

It IS true that the offer of freedom to those who have lived a life of dependency, or disability, or imprisonment of any sort can be very frightening. It's a whole unknown world out there. How will I cope? Many people say they'd rather have the limitations of the world they know than risk the insecurity of the unknown. A chronically sick person can get very used to being waited on, to abdicating responsibility.

But it doesn't just happen to the long-term sick. As we get older it is all too easy to settle into a comfortable routine, not looking for change or anything to upset the apple cart.

How true is that of our church life?. The risen Jesus is still alive, still with us, & the wind of the Spirit, is blowing, but generally church buildings & church worship have been much the same for many, many years now. We know what to expect, we know what to do, we know the other people who come, & we're comfortable. But all over the country in our churches we're saying: *We're getting older & there are fewer of us now, & people don't come like they used to. We know we're not well.*

I wonder whether Jesus might be saying to us: ***Do you want to get better?*** Do you really want things to change or are you actually rather used to making excuses & feeling helpless - even complacent? Are you perhaps daunted by the prospect of taking full responsibility for the present moment? Like the man by the pool we may find that a disturbing question.

It is a question which we all, myself included, need to ask ourselves. *Do we want to get better?*

Are we prepared to let the risen Jesus break into our familiar routines & really be Lord of our lives & our church? Are we prepared to let Him turn our lives round, to give us a new life, to show us a better way of being his people?

Do we WANT to get better? If our honest answer is yes, then we open the way for him to work in & throw us & our prayers & decision-making & to bring us new life.

Like the man by the pool, new freedom, new life, will inevitably bring new responsibility.

When Jesus hears the man expressing his need, he wastes no time, nor does he let the man waste any time. *Get up, pick up your mat & go - leave this place of apathy & excuses & disability & get out into the place where you can live your new life to the*

full. When Jesus gives new life - it's for living, not for putting under dust covers & bringing out on Sundays.

We can't read this story with integrity if we miss out the ending. ***Later Jesus found him at the temple & said to him; "Stop sinning or something worse may happen."*** In what way was that helpless man sinning? I think we can assume that his sin was the sin of inaction - complacency & apathy - making excuses. In today's terms, he was living on benefits & doing nothing to get back to work. Surely, in 38 yrs, if he'd really wanted to be well, he'd have organised that his friends who brought him to the pool day by day could have stayed with him & got him in 1st. But he'd got used to his less than perfect life. Jesus' warning must surely mean: Don't get complacent & lazy again; no more shirking responsibility, no more excuses. You have been given a new life - live it, take full advantage of it or you may lose it & find yourself in an even worse state than before.

What then is our response to the man who asks disturbing questions ***Do you want to get better?***

What do we really want? The old life & familiar ways - even if we know that things could be better? Even if we know we've grown complacent & taken the easy way in our Christian life & witness? Do we want to go on sitting by the pool waiting for the healing that may never happen?

Or are we ready to let Jesus give us again his new life - to renew our love & devotion for him, to renew our sense of urgency as we serve him in the world & renew our passion that others may know him as Saviour & Lord of life?
Are we ready for the new life, new freedom & new responsibility which He will give us if we choose to say yes?

The choice is ours, He will not force a response & no-one else can make it for us.

(time of quiet reflection)

Picture Jesus standing by you & asking you, by name; *Do you want to get well? Are there areas of your life which you know could be better? Are you prepared to jog along with 2nd best when I offer you life in all its fulness? Do you want to get well?* How are you going to respond to him?

Hymn: 793 God of almighty love

Prayers:

Lord God, help us to trust in you, that we may hope beyond hope & trust beyond trust. Let people see the faith of your church. Let us witness to your almighty power; though our faith is small it is in a great God.

May we help to uplift your people, to raise the fallen ,bring the sick to recovery.

Lord heal us **And raise us up**

Heal, O Lord, the wounds of our world.

We pray for all who suffer from hunger, for the outcasts of our society. We pray for communities devastated by storms, earthquakes or war.

Lord heal us **And raise us up**

Lord, enter our homes & bring peace to any divisions, that we may be one in you.

Show us the way that leads to life. Teach us to forgive & accept forgiveness. Cure the minds that are full of resentment & darkness.

Lord heal us **And raise us up**

We give thanks for the work of doctors & nurses: we pray for all hospitals & places of healing, for those that bring peace. We pray for friends & loved ones who are sick & those who have sick children.

Lord heal us **And raise us up. Amen**

Lord's Prayer

Hymn:798 O loving Lord

Ben: Let us go out from here with confidence, joy & renewed commitment, knowing that the crucified, risen & ascended Lord is with us always. Thanks be to God. Amen.