

Sixth Sunday of Easter

**Readings:**

**Acts 16: 9-15**

**John 5: 1-9**

When I was in one of our schools this week, I was sharing with them in their assembly the story of the Ascension. It's always good fun to share stories with children, and particularly to ask them to engage with the story and to try and work out what is coming next.

This week was no different. As I told the story, the children had a whale of a time trying to guess what was going to happen next. I love assemblies like this. Trying to encourage the youngest child with their hand up when they've so clearly got it wrong, but I can't quite bring myself to say that, or realising how badly I've misjudged my moment when the first child to put their hand up gets it right, and there's no play fun left to be had with the rest of the room!

This week, this last one was my experience. Straight away, a child in the room knew about the Ascension. Straight away, another child knew that once Jesus had ascended to the Father, two angels were left with the disciples. Straight away, yet another child wanted to tell me that angels are always good for us when we're confused, and they help us through our confusion.

In the end, I suggested that I should go and sit down while the children in the school taught me, because they were so good, and knew so much.

Well, today isn't about the Ascension. Ascension Day is on Thursday, and we will celebrate then, share in the good news of the Ascension, and take ourselves another step into the Easter story, really only leaving Pentecost to go until we come to the end of the season, and head into six months of ordinary time.

So, what I want to think about this morning isn't the Ascension. Let's leave that for Thursday. But I do want to think about this notion of knowing what comes next. The children in school this week knew what was coming, they shared with me in the story, and they brought so much to the story because of what they knew.

In today's Gospel reading, we have a picture of knowledge, understanding, hope, and yet at the same time, pain. There is a place, a pool, in Jerusalem, by the sheep gate, called Beth-zatha. It's not often St John in his Gospel talks with this level of precision. Every detail is made clear, and historians have done a lot of work researching this. This is fact, not faith, or supposition. This place existed, and any good tour guide in Jerusalem today can still take you there.

So John is painting a picture which can't be argued with. The pool was fed by a natural spring, which may well have had healing properties, and so, around this pool gathered those who needed healing. After such a detailed description of the place, everything that St John goes on to tell us follows so naturally. A man was there, by the side of the pool, who had been ill for thirty-eight years. Again, a very specific number, not about forty, but thirty-eight. John, and presumably Jesus, had taken the time to find out about this man, to know him, and to know his needs, and his weaknesses.

We're not told that he has sat there in that place for thirty-eight years. That would be a depressing picture. But he had been ill for thirty-eight years, and now, he has made it to the place of hope, the healing pool in Jerusalem. Jesus' question to him at the side of the pool is really important. "Do you want to be made well?". In many ways, what an odd question. He's made it to this place, he's near the pool and ready, he's made the effort to get here, and Jesus asks him whether he wants to be made well.

And doesn't the answer hurt. He doesn't say yes. He doesn't say no. Perhaps he doesn't realise who he is talking to. Perhaps he has no idea what could be about to happen. Somebody has just asked him whether he wants to be made well. And so he tells the truth. Whether I want to be made well or not is of no consequence. It really doesn't matter. The truth is that I can't get down to the pool quickly enough. When the time is right I do my best, but there is always someone who gets there quicker than I do. Someone who goes away healed, and happy, while I continue to sit here.

And so, what happened next must have been astonishing to the man. He probably didn't expect anything to happen as a result of this little whinge. The time was just right for him to speak. How often has that happened to you? Those times when you just need to say what's on your mind. You probably don't expect a response, or anything to change, but you just need to get it off your chest.

It's a bit like the assembly of a primary school. The question is asked, and there's something you long to say. It might not be the most sensible thing, it might not be the most appropriate thing, but it is the thing that matters to you in that moment, and so you're going to make sure you say it. And once it's said, what is there to do next. It won't change anything, but it's been said, and perhaps you do feel better for saying it.

And so, for the man sitting at the pool, what happened next must have been astonishing. He's just made it quite clear. He could have said it differently, he could have been rude, or abusive. What do you think I'm sitting here for – of course I want to be made well – if only these other selfish so and so's didn't keep pushing me out of the way – what chance do I have, and you ask me a question like that!

But this isn't what he did. Instead, he states his case calmly, politely, and perhaps hopefully, that Jesus might bring him to the water. Perhaps he had hope, faith in the goodness of humanity, that this man who had asked such a question, might actually care enough to help.

Surely he never thought to expect the answer he actually got. "Stand up, take your mat, and walk". Suddenly there's no need for healing springs or pools. Suddenly there's no more waiting. Suddenly he can do what he hasn't done for thirty-eight years. Stand up, take your mat, and walk. Not what he expected, but at the end of this story of extraordinary detail from St John, this is what happened.

For one man, life was changed in an instant. But the story isn't quite finished. We can't come to the end of this account without noticing that there is one more sentence on the end of the story, one more twist, one more moment of amazement. "Now that day was a sabbath". As though this was somehow the most unusual part of the whole story. Jesus did this, healed this man, performed this miracle, on the sabbath.

With our knowledge of the Gospel stories, you might want to imagine what happened next. If you were in a Primary School assembly, you might suggest that Jesus was going to get into trouble for performing this work on the Sabbath. But, if we read on into the next verses of the story, we get another unexpected shock. The first thing that happens to the man who has been healed, once he does what Jesus tells him, is that he is told off for carrying his mat on the Sabbath.

This is a story full of the unexpected. This is a story full of things happening that the people involved in them could never have imagined. It's not an Easter story, and although we're still in the Easter season, we are now coming to its end, and getting ourselves ready to spend six months hearing the stories of Jesus' life and ministry from St Luke's Gospel. But before we do this, today we hear this story. Perhaps looking forward to all that will be, the stories of Jesus' life, but also perhaps looking back over the last six weeks, and all the stories of Resurrection. Perhaps they are better known stories, stories that Primary School children know well, and can confidently answer questions about, but in reality, they are no less extraordinary, no less life changing, and no less remarkable than the story we heard today.

This is the essence of our faith. Christianity is extraordinary, it is remarkable, and most of all, it is life changing. Jesus' presence was life changing for the man at the pool, and it should be no less life changing for anyone who comes to hear of his story, to know his love, and to walk with him in his Resurrected life.

So, let us pray that our lives may be changed by Christ's presence in us, that we might show to others what that presence is to us, and that we may continue to live, as we approach Ascension Day and the end of the Easter season, as a Resurrection people, recognising the risen Christ in all that we are and do, today and every day.