

Homily on the Healing of the Paralytic Man at the Pool of Bethesda.

Father Filip Lommaert

Sunday, 10 May 2020

In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Christ is Risen! Truly He is Risen!

Today is the Sunday of the paralytic man, in which St John tells the story of a man who had been ill for thirty-eight years and was finally healed.

Why do we read this gospel today? Only last week we listened to the gospel reading of the myrrh-bearing women. And somehow today we seem to be going back in time, to the time before Our Lord and Saviour's crucifixion and resurrection.

The reason why we read today's reading, or at least part of the reason, is because Jesus visited this paralytic man at "mid-feast". It is almost mid-feast now (mid-feast falls this coming Wednesday 13 May 2020) which means we are half-way between Pascha and Pentecost. Pentecost is a feast of 50 days, and we are in that period awaiting Pentecost. Jewish people also celebrated Pentecost, although it had a different meaning for them.

Our lord Jesus came to Jerusalem towards the middle of that festive period, and saw this man at the pool, in Hebrew called Bethesda, near the Sheep Gate which has five porticoes.

The paralytic man was waiting for the stirring of the waters by an angel so that he could be healed. His wait had lasted not for an hour, or a few days, or even a few years, but for 38 long years!

As amazing as this man's patience and perseverance may have been, perhaps what stands out even more is the fact that no one, not a single person during all these years had felt compassion for him and helped him into the pool.

This aspect of the story is often forgotten, but it is important for us because we must never ignore the fact that situations of great suffering exist and will always exist in the world today. Countless people suffer every day from different afflictions, and many have no one to care for them. And never has this been truer than since the onset of the

Covid-19 lockdown. We should not forget that not everyone has access to the internet and has a PC, laptop or mobile phone.

So, for us, this Gospel message must be a call to action: We are all made in God's image and as such, we are called to love our neighbours as we love ourselves. All of us, therefore, are responsible for one another. This is part of our mission as followers of Christ.

But we must also be aware that a person's suffering may not be as outwardly obvious to us as the affliction of the paralytic man. Even if we look at the people around us, there is no way of knowing how broken they are, how much pain and agony there is in their lives, or how many broken hopes, how much fear and rejection and contempt is bringing them down. But even if we cannot see it, that does not mean that it is not there.

Why? Because, it is a spiritual struggle, which we all share: that horrible disease which we call sin. So, we can say that suffering is not only the outward physical pain, but also the inner spiritual pain that man is suffering. And spiritual sickness is especially terrible because it harms our relationship with others and ultimately our relationship with God.

But before we even start to contemplate helping others, we must stand still and examine ourselves first and see what sins are plaguing us. Because it is all too easy to take the very well-known option called: "Do as I say, not as I do". And yes, it takes great courage to look inside oneself, because when we do, we will always find things that we do not like or that we do not want to accept. When we examine the causes of our own sufferings, we frequently try to find causes outside of ourselves. We all know it is so much easier to place the blame on someone or something other than ourselves, rather than taking personal responsibility for our sins.

The only way to deal with our sins is to find the strength to face them not just on our own, but with God's help. But the truth is that the causes are inside us and cannot be avoided. And we must find the strength to face them, with God's help of course. We must also realise that in fighting our spiritual battles, our sinful problems will not change overnight. It takes a number of things in order to change, and patience is probably the most important.

Let us go return to the paralytic man, who after 38 years of suffering, could have complained when Christ arrived, asking him “What took you so long?”, but he did not. Instead of an angry, bitter response to the Lord’s question: “Do you want to be healed?” The paralytic man responded, calmly and patiently. He was struggling, but never gave up hope.

And we cannot give up hope either. In our darkest moments, when things may seem hopeless, and beyond salvation, we must never forget that God is with us and that he loves us. The paralytic man suffered in loneliness because he had no one to help him. He could not bring about healing through his own efforts. So, what did he do? He waited patiently for Christ our Lord and Saviour. And we too, must follow this example, and wait patiently for God to help us deal with our afflictions.

The second thing that is required is a little work on our part. When the Lord commanded the paralytic man to “Rise, be made whole, take up your bed and walk” he was giving the paralytic a command, an order. For this man who had been paralytic most of his life “taking up his bed and walk” must have been a superhuman task. The man’s muscles must have been completely wasted away with no physical strength in them.

The only way it would have been possible for him to do this would have been because he genuinely believed in the Lord. He did not waiver or utter excuses for why he would not be able to do this. He just did it. Because he believed in the Lord.

We must also ask ourselves: why did Jesus ask the man if he wanted to be healed? Because in Jesus Christ dwells the fullness of the Godhead bodily (Colossians 2.9). The grace of God is in our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. It was God’s wish to heal the man by his Grace. This Grace is the free gift of God, and not the outcome of what man thinks he deserves.

Taking up one’s bed and walking involves obedience and work. This is the command which we all received at baptism, when we received the Holy Spirit which gave us the ability to follow the commandments and to become pure. Taking up the bed is like taking up our cross; it is our mission to follow Christ’s example and how He lived. We must continue to say “yes” to this mission, throughout our lives regardless of the time we spent being involved in spiritual struggle.

Thirdly, it is necessary to trust in God by taking our free will and submitting it to God by placing our hope in Him. Only then can we begin to see our sufferings turn to healing and can we begin to also help others who suffer, by letting Christ work through us. It is only then, that we can look at one another with true understanding and with proper attention, so that we can reach out to each other and truly love our neighbour as we love ourselves.

Finally, the Gospel closes with a warning which our Lord mentions to the paralytic man after his healing, but also to all of us. Jesus says: "Sin no more, so that nothing worse happens to you." In other words, now you have been healed, be careful not to return to a sinful life, in order that nothing worse happens to you.

This is a warning to us. If we show no sign that we want to be healed; if we try to hide from our sins instead of facing them and take responsibility for them, if we don't place our trust and hope in God and if we do not obey the command of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ to rise and carry our cross, then we too will continue to lie in sickness, or our spiritual sickness will become even worse, which may make the paralytic man's 38 years seem like a short time.

So, what is the way out?

What is the solution?

A wise priest once wrote: The answer is given in today's Gospel. The way out is Christ, He who healed the paralytic man. And we must be ready to receive Him as did the paralytic man. To trust God and let Him work through us. For Christ can heal physical illness and spiritual illness, not only because He overcomes sin, but because He can overcome the ultimate consequence of sin: death itself.

Christ is risen!

Amen.