

Let's look at the gospel passage again so we can understand the context a little more.

So we are in Jerusalem, by the sheep gate and there is a pool. The many sick and disabled people that were around the pool were attracted to this place as they had heard it was a place where people got healed by the waters. Apparently the water was only 'effective' when the waters were stirred. It makes sense that the pool probably had a spring of water flowing into it and that this only flowed at certain times – maybe when there had been a rainfall on a nearby mountain. It was believed that an angel appeared and stirred up the waters and then whoever was to go in immediately after this would be healed.

Can you imagine the stampede when the waters did stir - people pushing others, possibly hurt in the stampede or even killed in this competition: who is going to be the fastest? Imagine that tense atmosphere, the waiting, with one eye on the water and the other on the people around.

Of course, the sick man we are told about had been waiting for that time to be first for 38 years. Long enough that most people would stop believing.

Jesus takes the initiative when he arrives – he singles out the man who he knows is a hopeless case. Every time the waters stirred the sick man would try to get to the front and be defeated each time. He had been waiting so patiently and was frustrated possibly on a weekly basis. This man had had no one offer him a helping hand but Jesus offers him that and more.

Now, I am one of the most naïve people I know. I will believe people when they tell me things and April fool's day is a day I dread. My family and friends now know that I fall so easily for April fool jokes and thankfully they don't take advantage of it – So, all of you, don't get any ideas! It is a day that I have to prepare myself for as I so easily fall for the simplest of jokes. One day I ran down the stairs excited to tell Paul about the sharks they had found in the Birmingham canal – until Paul reminded me dryly what date it was. Other things I've believed have been chickens that they had bred to lay chocolate eggs and when Sutton Coldfield council decided to paint the colour of their pavements pink so it would be easier for the many visually impaired people to cross the road. The worst one was on Facebook – just this year - it was one of those clever puzzles that are often available. You had to say the three words listed quickly together and keep repeating and you would hear the word 'orange' appear in the sounds. I was keen to have a go so repeated the words GULL, LEIGH and BULL – I did stop after the fourth time round you'll be pleased to know!

The sudden realisation that all this time you have been believing something to be true that actually isn't is a challenge and relief all at once.

And possibly this may have been the same for the man at the pool. He found out that the thing he had been believing in all this time was not true and the only way to be fully healed was through the person of Jesus. What a challenge and relief all at once.

So Jesus simply asks him to stand up, pick up your mat and walk! That was all. No follow up sermon, no telling off. The sick man hoped for healing and he got it.

This man needed someone to tell him about Jesus and the chance that he offers and the difference He makes to our life.

Gary Barlow from the pop Group Take That recently went through a dreadful bereavement when his child was stillborn. The local clergy came round to support him and the Barlow family attended church for a few services during that tough time. He spoke afterwards about how surprised he was to hear about this loving God for the first time in his life. Because of that experience he wrote a song entitled 'God' and I think this song is for all of us.

The lyrics say: Tell me... If you found God and he gave you hope - Would you tell the world or save your soul?

If you found God, would you take him home - Would you open the curtains or keep them closed?

If you found God, if you found God - Would it be your secret?

To keep the king of heaven and earth right next to you - Would it be your secret?

I want to challenge us this morning... what are we doing about this? What about those out there who are needing to hear about how Jesus can change them? What about those who are waiting for 'something other' and we know that actually the thing that is missing in their life is God? What can we do to show them how God is in our lives and how he is making a difference in us?

Next week we are starting our week of prayer that the Archbishops have asked us as a church to do. This will include praying for friends, friends who you feel would benefit from knowing God. It may be that you are able to turn this prayer into action and invite your friends to church.

Inviting people to Church - some find this easier than others. So I've designed some vouchers for you to use which might help to start the conversation. I think someone is going to pass these around now - I want to ask you to take two vouchers with you – at least – there will be more at the back if you are feeling really keen.

So, I encourage you to pray first

and then maybe give one voucher to a friend, someone you know

and then the other voucher to a stranger.

Ah, now friend is one thing – but a stranger! Reverend Liz, have you gone mad – I hear you saying – in fact I hear Simon saying that many days! I sometimes set off from home and pray that I'll have the privilege of meeting someone to talk to on the way to Daily prayer. Do the same. Pray as you set off for your shopping trip, or as you catch the bus. Have your voucher with you. Ask God to guide you – so you will know who to give it to. It could be you post it through a letterbox or give it to someone in the street. It may be that you hand it over to someone on the bus or at a bus stop. It may be that you have it in your bag/pocket ready for when you get in the lift with another person and get chatting. You may want to say: 'This is for you – it's a voucher to try out the local church.'

Do you feel up to taking that risk? Exciting and petrifying at the same time, hey?

People may surprise you with a question, about God, about your faith, about why you go to church, but don't worry if you can't answer it – just be yourself. And then pray for them after you have given them the voucher. I will let you in to a secret! Prayer works! It really does ☺. Pray for others as they pluck up courage to give their voucher out or to admit to someone that they go to Church.

Shall we see what happens and how God works in our community over the next few weeks and months? Are you all ready to try this together as a congregation? I am not doing this sermon as yet at the other services so shall we go into competition with the other services? Yes? If the church suddenly starts to grow then I give you permission to feel smug for at least a minute, you can pat each other on the back for a few seconds – but then maybe we do give the glory back to God!

If we all pray and work together then amazing things will happen.

So be encouraged to take up our mats – let us do the walking. Let us use our feet to find people and tell them about Jesus just as this healed man did.