**SERMON FOR EASTER 6 | 22.05.22**

**Acts 16: 9-15, Revelation 21: 10, 22—22: 5; St John 5: 1-9**

**Do you enjoy looking back at old photographs? And gasping at strange haircuts, clothes you wouldn’t been seen dead in, holding items that have long since disappeared, sitting in furniture which just screams ‘old’ to us now! Perhaps you still have old magazines and newspapers (I have a collection of newspapers for my birthday in November which I have collected every year since I was 17!)**

**Why the question: because in today’s Gospel, St John tells us that the paralysed man has been sitting by the pool of Bethesda for 38 years! So what were you doing in 1984? For those you of you were actually alive then, let’s take a quick trip down memory lane:**

**1984 was the year: the Thames Barrier was opened, PC Yvonne Fletcher was shot dead outside the Libyan embassy and the IRA bombed the hotel in Brighton where the Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher, and several members of her cabinet were staying. It was the year Virgin Atlantic was inaugurated and the UK agreed to return Hong Kong to the Chinese. Ronald Reagan was re-elected President of the US and a first class stamp was 17p. It was the year the Soviet Union boycotted the Los Angeles Olympics and the film Ghostbusters was released. HIV was identified for the first time and Indira Gandhi was assassinated. In the Church, General Synod approved the ordination of woman to be deacons; priestings wouldn’t come until 1997; David Jenkins was consecrated bishop of Durham, three days before a major fire burnt out part of York Minster. Finally Bob Geldorf organised a simultaneous broadcast in London and Philadelphia to raise money for the Ethiopian famine with the song, *Do they know it’s Christmas?***

**It really does seem a very, very long time ago! What were you doing that year? (For what it is worth, I was ordained priest in Durham Cathedral in 1984 and was living in Hartlepool). And Jesus knew that the man in this Gospel story had been there for all that time…**

**So perhaps it is hardly surprising that Jesus asks him, *Do you want to be made well?* Or put another way, *have you, after all this time, become content with the life that you lead, watching and waiting for the pool to be stirred into action by the spring underneath, knowing that – because you don’t have friends and family around you - someone would always get in to the pool ahead of you?***

**It's a tough question: it’s the question that all of us have had to ask at various stages of our lives: are we content with what we have, where we are, content with the people around us? Or if we want to push the question a bit harder, are we resigned perhaps to not having quite made the targets we had set for ourselves when we were younger, travelled where we wanted, seen and experienced more of what the world has to offer? Perhaps we had high hopes of making a real success of something or having different kinds of relationships in our lives?**

**I think we are all aware of the tsunami of challenges that prod and poke at us from every quarter. I opened the Evening Standard the other night and there was a piece from a very articulate 30 something black woman, saying that while she was not averse to the Royal family, especially at the time of the Platinum Jubilee, she looked at Prince William and wondered whether he was ready yet for the changes that would be required of him if he was to be a head of state that would be relevant to people like her. The JK Rowling row over transgender rights and the ‘woke’ debate shows little sign of running out of steam.**

**And Jesus’ question is just as relevant to us as we think of our spiritual lives. As we begin our First Communion programme for our young people shortly, I am very aware that the same stories we share with them have a very different resonance when we use them with our adult baptism candidates: and yet how many of us rely on what we learned at Sunday School as the foundation for our faith? I mentioned David Jenkins the bishop of Durham earlier. I remember him coming to stay with us when I was in Bradford and hearing his frustration at the child-like, literal way that so many Christians treat the Biblical accounts as if what they heard in Sunday School really was the last word! He became famous because of what he said about the Resurrection but his whole attitude was inspired by his thirst for what the Spirit was saying to the Churches – now. None of us can afford to rely on what we learned all those years ago if we are to try to live like Jesus in the 21st century – our parish strap line. The Bible has to come alive in today’s context.**

**At this time of the Church year we are reading passages taken from the story of the early Church, the book of Acts. Today’s episode is just typical of the way we are encouraged to be ready for anything.**

**Lydia is a successful business-women but she is intrigued by what she has heard of the new group called the Christians so she sneaks down to the river and the place where they had begun to meet on a regular basis.**

**And there she hears St Paul sharing the Gospel – in words she can relate to, talking about things which matter to her, in words that she can understand. And radical though it all was, she was prepared not just to get baptised herself but to bring her whole family with her. And the rest is history: she was wealthy enough to be able to sponsor the new group fairly generously and she is soon opening up her own home to Paul and the community.**

***Do you want to be made well*, Jesus asks the man by the pool of Bethesda. *Do you want to grow in faith and know me better*, he says to us. And what can we say: actually I am quite content to be where I am, thanks very much. More than that, if I am going to get involved in this faith journey it has to be on my terms – with the right place, the right people, the right music, the right ambience…**

**So just in case we need further encouragement we have this passage from Revelation, our second reading. As you know, I generally warn people off reading this final book of the Bible because it is a hard read and you need to know quite a lot about the symbolism you find there before you can work out what the message is all about.**

**But this passage from almost the last chapter is clear enough: it is a picture of water (again!) and in particular the kind of water which can heal us and help us to grow. Here St John paints this extraordinary picture – for those living in a dry land like Israel – of a land where everything is blossoming fantastically well: *and on either side of the river is the Tree of Life with its twelve kinds of fruit, producing its fruit each month; and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations…***

**We are so good at looking back, so good at finding our security in what we know and what we find congenial. But as I looked up that list of events in 1984, it wasn’t all fun and games then either! We can’t remain in the past, certainly not the past of 38 years ago! So Jesus stands beside us now and asks the same question as he did the paralytic: *do you want to get better?* And the reply, ‘I do’, the one that everyone makes at their baptism, is all that is needed. *Then get up and walk*, he says. Don’t look back: embrace (and enjoy) the now!**