

Healing at the Pool

John 5:1-18

Slide one

Now just for a change I want to start today's message with a bit of culture: a J M Turner masterpiece called 'The Fighting Temeraire' voted by Radio 4 listeners in 2005 as the best British painting. Now I have to confess ignorance: I had never seen this painting before. But the story behind it is interesting and inspiring. The Temeraire was captured from the French and then used by the British in the Battle of Trafalgar: it had two levels of guns and three masts. At a crucial part of the battle the Temeraire came in between the French Fleet and the Victory and saved the flag ship whilst sinking two French ships. Turner's painting shows the once great ship being tugged up the Thames to the scrap yard at Tilbury. But the picture is suitably vague in it's setting: is the sun setting or is it rising.

It struck me at the time that this could be a picture of the contemporary Church and the picture and John 5 put together add up to God giving us a wake up call! The Church is disabled: lame, blind and paralysed: do we want to get well? The blame game is much easier: the world has changed, things aren't what they used to be, etc.etc. Before the Church was all guns blazing: now none, largely spiked by secularism and materialism. But surely the Spirit of God is calling us into a new day!

We need to take the authority, which we have as believers and as Church and with the help of the tug of the Holy Spirit get up a head of steam, leading the way into a new dawn.

'Honey I shrunk up the kids' was the most improbable movie I have ever seen, but it was a light-hearted laugh that pursued the fantastic idea of a machine that could 'supersize' some objects and shrinks others down to miniature. A ridiculous notion? But I have actually discovered such a machine: it's called 'mere religion'. You see I never ceased to be amazed as I observe the stunning

power of religion to shrink a miracle down to something unnoticeable, and then inflate a triviality to gigantic proportions. The congregation that prays they will reach local young people from the housing estate may have to deal with this machine lest they fail to see the miracle of some of them showing up and even becoming Christians, and only see the mess that they make as they smoke their cigarettes and giggle in the church porch when they do. One congregation I know prayed for years for young people to join them, and then went mad when a few grubby handprints appeared on the whitewashed walls of their building. The religious police wheeled out that gadget when Jesus healed a man who had battled with illness - for some 38 years (v5). Jesus puts an inclusive question to someone who most probably earned his living as a local unwell character (v6). Then something mysterious takes place, not just in the miraculous healing, but also in a way Jesus is almost nudging his critics to bring out the supersizing/shrinking machine. He commands the man to take up his bed and walk. It was a legal tradition (but note importantly, not an OT law) that no one would carry their bed on the Sabbath. And the 'machine' zaps the moment as the miracle of forgiveness is forgotten and all focus is placed on the 'sin' of bed carrying. Of course we can all be guilty of more subtle magnifying and shrinking: when we focus on what irritates us about that person rather than their sacrificial kindness, or when our hard working pastor just can't make it to our hospital bedside and we are hurt because of their lack of care, forgetting the huge workload they are struggling with. Be careful today. Honey don't shrink a miracle.

Slide two: the end or a new beginning?

Someone once said that with God there are no ends only new beginnings. So in John 5 John is challenging us to face up to the challenge, the battle before us: is this the end or a new beginning? For the Church and for Christians: is this the Sun

setting or the Sun rising? Are we set for the scrap yard or are we expecting resurrection? Questions of faith, questions we need to answer for depending on our answers will depend the future health and fruitfulness of the Church and more specifically St Andrews! In the past we have been all guns blazing: Wesley and Whitfield and the Evangelical Revival, William Booth and the Salvation Army, the Welsh Revival, the Billy Graham era, but now its backs to the wall, batten down the hatches, the enemy of secularisation is at the gate. Is the Tug Boat taking us to the scrap yard or is it gaining a head of steam and leading us into a new dawn for Christian Witness in our Nation? I believe it's the later.

Slide three: The Tug of Grace

Grace has this amazing power to tug at our hearts. Grace is unique to Christianity and personified in Christ. The key question in the encounter with the man at the Pool is: **Do you want to get well (v6)?** Tis grace that taught my heart to fear! And Grace my fears relieved, said John Newton. Grace is tugging at your heart and mine and calling you into a deeper walk with Christ. Put simply the challenge of grace is: do you want to change, do you want to live for Jesus 24/7, do you want to lead a person to Christ, and do you want to disciple others into Christian maturity? Grace tugged at the man at the pool and he had to make a choice and so do we. Salvation is not a once for all event: it's a process, a journey we need to choose to take. Maybe you are thinking: I'm not growing, I've got stuck at the pool in my comfort zone, God won't mind! Think again! He has plans for your life, which are beyond whatever you can ask or even imagine! Grace is tugging and you need to respond: and grace wants to tug at those around you but you are the key to their salvation too. Spirit, Soul & Body he wants to bring you into line with His purposes and it's a glorious adventure of faith to take! This year it's my 38th birthday of becoming a Christian....38 years....coincidence? I don't

think so. I am not prepared anymore to live as a Christian with my guns spiked, treading on spiritual eggshells to keep Christians and congregations happy. In the power of the Spirit I want to be able to help win many spiritual trafilgars in my day and with my generation.

Slide four: The Tug of Healing

One of the books that shaped my early Christian experience was the story of Joni Erickson who was paralysed from the neck downwards but who overcame her disability to become a powerful witness for Christ (painting, speaking, singing etc.). Blind, lame and paralysed came regularly to the Pool of Bethesda: such is the physical reality for many today and whilst some are healed most are not. Such precious souls are of huge value to God: but John's description of this man as an invalid for 38 years is a title our so-called civilised society gives. How the enemy of our soul: Satan, would love to make us invalid for eternity, but God's purpose is that we should be of use to him whether we are physically healed or not. The tug of God's healing steams on according to His purpose, not ours, and this side of eternity we will not understand why some are healed and others not, but we choose to trust Him. The tug of God's healing allows for no rivals. The man complained that there was no one to help him get into the water when it stirred: somebody always beats me! But the Lord heard the cry of His heart and acted with authority: Get up! Pick up your mat and walk. As he did he was healed.

Why do people go to healing seminars and not to ones on connecting with community, bringing the gospel to the poor and learning how to pray? Perhaps that sounds judgemental and when nine years ago I had a spell in hospital in absolute agony tasting first hand the power of lingering pain and the hyperactive imagination that fear prompts, my perspective sifted! Sickness can create desperation (the example of the second sign John gives us: the Officials son, is instructive), and especially if it's

someone close to us. The healing of the official's son brings a whole family into the kingdom.

I've prayed enough unsuccessful prayers for the sick, and sadly seen some of them get worse, to know I don't have a specific ministry in healing. And I've seen enough circus antics by 'healing evangelists' to have serious questions about their actions. But prayer for those who are unwell is a vital, urgent facet of the local church's pastoral ministry. We see far too few healings these days. The problem of why some are healed and others not is bewildering. But, for God's sake, and for the sake of His suffering, desperate people, let's not stop asking.

So let the tug of healing pull you back into the supernatural action of our God who delights to work His miracles of grace.

Slide five: The Tug of Religion

As ever the Enemy of our Soul will counterfeit everything the Lord does in such a way as to trap us into mere religion. It's much easier after 38 years to stay as you are within your comfort zone than to let go and let God! The Pool is a comfortable familiar place (like a pair of slippers) and begging a comfortable occupation. The religious immediately rounded upon Jesus: you healed him on God's day off (the Sabbath), and then you encouraged him to carry his mat: that's work and not allowed. They focused on the insignificant and missed the magnificent! It's much easier to blame others (it's the pastors fault) or circumstances (if I was in a good church I would grow), than to take responsibility for ones life. Safer to glory in the good old days than live today for Jesus!

Maybe, just maybe, you came to Christ '38' years ago and maybe your Christian life has never moved on from that first encounter: to you the Lord says: Do you want to live a dynamic Christian life and make a present impact for the Saviour? If you do, the Lord says: let's journey and don't forget your mat as a reminder of how far you have come and can go!

Slide six: The Tug of Salvation

Ultimately this is the purpose of the Church: to bring sinners home to their Saviour: the lover of their souls, Jesus. The Church is the only organisation that exists for the benefit of its non-members, said Archbishop William Temple. The Tug of Salvation encourages us to prioritise the lost and see the multitudes come into the Kingdom. Ultimately this is the healing that Christ offers and that He died to pay for: wholeness of Spirit, Soul and Body. Complete in Christ Jesus.

To the man Christ says: Stop Sinning (he says to same to the women caught in Adultery). Salvation involves an act of my will every day to go God's way and to do God's will: thank God he has given me His Spirit to help me achieve this! Then Jesus says what seems like a threat: stop sinning or something worse may happen. Is it a threat or just plain reality? John 15:6 puts it starkly: If anyone does not remain in me, he is like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up and thrown into the fire and burned. There is a consequence to every choice we make: and you cannot sit on the fence.

The mans' testimony is simple and instructive: Jesus has made me well! Is that not your testimony and mine!! After 38 years the Invalid (society's title) knew himself to be valid and valued in the sight of God: Life began again!

So this is a day of new beginnings: of Grace, Healing and Salvation. The Pool is being stirred, perspectives are changing, and new paradigms are being forged. Battleships are becoming tugs, and to a new dawn we are steaming!

So back to the Fighting Temeraire: is the sun setting or rising, is it the scrap yard or resurrection, is it all guns blazing and now none or is the tug boat getting a head of steam and leading the way into a new dawn? So Church what will it be: Unbelief of Faith? Will we allow ourselves individually and corporately to be

transformed into new wineskins for Kingdom action: small mobile trail blazing into God's future? And what about me? Has 38 years of religion neutralised me? Choices loom large: what do I really want? Do I want to be well: fit for the Masters service?

Pastor David

January 27th 2013