

SUNDAY OF THE PARALYTIC
Tabitha and the Samaritans

May 10, 2009
4th Sunday of Pascha
Revision E

GOSPEL: John 5:1-15

EPISTLE: Acts 9:32-42

Today's Gospel lesson used to be used in some Western churches a couple generations ago for the 14th Sunday after Trinity (early August). But it is disappearing from use today. Today's Epistle is not used in the West at all.

GOSPEL LESSON - John 5:1-15

The pool of Bethesda mentioned in the Gospel lesson was 100 yards from the Temple area near the Sheep Gate and was used for washing the sacrificial lambs before they were slain. This means that quite a few sheep got washed in this pool. One thousand sheep passed through this pool per year just from the morning and evening offering, the Sabbath offering and the first of the month offering (Numbers 28:1-11). At the dedication of the Temple, Solomon offered 120,000 sheep over the course of one week (1 Kings 8:63), and they all were probably washed in this pool of Bethesda. Figuring at least 10,000 sheep per year as an average, the pool of Bethesda may not have been as clean and crystal clear as a Southern California backyard swimming pool. This may explain why the lame and paralyzed were sitting around the pool and not in the pool.

With many sheep passing through the pool of Bethesda, there had to be an organized effort and various captive industries to support it. For example, the shepherds who were keeping watch over their flocks by night (Luke 2:8-21) when Jesus was born were part of this industry. Their flocks were in the queue for the sacrifices in Jerusalem.

The old city of Jerusalem had an extensive and intricate underground water system that is still being explored today. Extensive tunnels and underground springs existed. Some people have "explained" the stirring of the water of the pool as being caused by the hydraulic effects of intermittencies in the underground springs. The close connection of the pool to the Temple and the Presence of God (in the Holy of Holies) makes the angelic explanation in v.4 quite plausible also. One can expect to see a lot of angelic activity in the Presence of God. (Compare John 1:51, Psalm 91:11-12). Some have attributed the "stirring" of the Pool of Bethesda to the Archangel Raphael; for more details, see the Feast Day for Archangels.

Jesus' first remarks to the paralytic of our Gospel lesson are puzzling. The Lord asked him simply, "Do you want to be made whole (or healthy)? The man had been there for 38 years

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waiting for an opportunity to be the first one in the water after the angel stirred it. But every time the stirring occurred, someone else beat him into the water. Since he was laying on a bed as opposed to sitting up, he may have been a quadriplegic as opposed to a paraplegic (i.e. paralyzed neck down versus waist down). In other words, he may not have been able to move at all since he needed “a man to put me into the pool” (v.7).

The Lord did not necessarily ask a dumb question, “Do you want to be made whole?” Some people prefer to be infirm in some way so that others will take care of them, or so that they can avoid their responsibilities. It’s a little like staying home “sick” on the day of a big final exam or on the day of a big confrontation at work.

In verse 6, the Lord asked: “Do you want to be made whole?” In verse 14, He said: “See, you have been made whole. Sin no more lest a worse thing come upon you!” The only time Jesus was recorded as using a similar phrase was in His final words to the woman caught in the act of adultery by the Scribes and Pharisees: “Neither do I condemn you; go and sin no more” (John 8:10-11). We don’t usually think of a poor helpless cripple as being a sinner, but perhaps there was more to it than that. Everything depended on the condition of his heart which the Lord can see and we can’t.

The “worse thing” that Jesus referred to is illustrated in Luke 11:24-26. There, Jesus described what happens when someone is healed and cleaned out. Once cleaned out, if a man does not have the Holy Spirit guarding his dwelling (i.e., his heart and soul) someone stronger than he (i.e., the demons) will overcome him (Luke 11:21-22). When they do, they will bring with them other demons that are stronger and even more evil such that the last state of the man will be worse than the first.

This healing of the paralytic had some major repercussions since it was done on the Sabbath (John 5:1, 9). And not just a weekly Sabbath, but the Pentecost Sabbath (according to John Chrysostom, Homily xxxvi on John 5). For a more detailed discussion of the Sabbath Laws, see the Gospel lesson for the 10th Sunday of Luke. The Laws concerning the Sabbath were very strict and had teeth in them. For example:

- Complete rest was required Exodus 23:12; 31:15; 35:2
- One could not even kindle a fire (to cook a meal) Exodus 35:3
- No gathering of wood for the day after the Sabbath was allowed either Numbers 15:32-36
- This was one of the Ten Commandments Exodus 20:9-11,
Deuteronomy 5:13-15
- The death penalty was prescribed for anyone breaking the Sabbath Exodus 31:15; 35:2

But also tied in to the Sabbath observation was a recalling of the time Israel was being “worked to death” in Egypt (Deuteronomy 5:15). Thus, the Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath (Mark 2:27). But it was also a holy day (Exodus 16:23; 20:11; 31:15), and a day of gladness (Numbers 10:10). On this day, the daily offering was doubled (four lambs versus two, see Numbers 28:3-15) and the shewbread was set out in the Holy Place (Leviticus 24:8) before the Lord. The Sabbaths were also to be a sign (or omen) between Israel and God “that they might know that I am the Lord who sanctifies them” (Ezekiel 20:12, 20).

In the true spirit of the Sabbath, Jesus did a number of healings on the Sabbath. For example:

- The paralytic (today's Gospel) John 5:9
- A man with a withered hand Matthew 12:10; Mark 3:2; Luke 6:7
- The man born blind (Gospel for 6th Sunday of Pascha) John 9:14
- A woman's hunchback (Gospel for 10th Sunday of Luke) Luke 13:14
- A man with dropsy Luke 14:3

When the Scribes and Pharisees criticized Jesus for these things -- saying that He was working on the Sabbath -- Jesus replied: that mercy, not sacrifice was to be the spirit of the Sabbath (Matthew 12:7, Hosea 6:6).

Following today's Gospel lesson, Jesus had some discussions with the Jewish leaders where He spoke to them about how He was just doing His Father's work (John 5:17; 19-47). Therefore, the Jewish leaders had two counts against Him: one for breaking the Sabbath and another for making Himself equal with God (John 5:18). Both were capital offenses under Mosaic Law (Leviticus 24:10-23).

There are two paradoxes in all this: First, the Jewish leaders had such heartache with Jesus doing good on the Sabbath, when that was what the Sabbath was for. Second, they accused Jesus of blasphemy for (1) claiming to be equal with God (John 5:18; 10:33; 19:7) and (2) forgiving sins which only God can do (Matthew 9:2-3; Luke 5:20-21). Yet they themselves were the real blasphemers when they claimed Jesus cast out demons by the ruler of the demons (Mark 3:20-30; Matthew 12:24-37).

John Chrysostom (4th Century) pointed out some details in this Gospel lesson that are worth considering: sin had been the cause of the Paralytic's condition, for Jesus said, "See, you have been made whole (or healthy). Sin no more, lest a worse thing come upon you" (v.14). Earlier, Jesus began by asking the Paralytic, "Do you want to be made whole (or healthy)?" Yet the Paralytic did not even know Who Jesus was (v.13), never mind believe that He could perform the miracle. On other occasions, Jesus had asked the recipients if they believed He could work the cure (Matthew 9:28). In this case, then, He healed the Paralytic before he exhibited any faith.

Once cured, however, Chrysostom pointed out that the former Paralytic showed evidence of a rekindled faith. For example: (1) He immediately got up and walked without mocking or questioning or doubting. (2) He obeyed Jesus in carrying his bed, even though in violation of the Sabbath Laws. (3) When challenged by the Jewish leaders about breaking the Sabbath Laws, he referred to an obviously higher authority Who told him to do so. (4) In spite of the harassment of the Jewish leaders, the former Paralytic went straight to the Temple, "which is an indication of his great piety. For he departed not into the market places, nor gave himself up to luxury and ease, but remained in the Temple although about to sustain a violent attack and to be harassed by all there."

Chrysostom also pointed out that Jesus concealed Himself after the healing (v.13). Why? "First, that while He was absent, the testimony of the man might be unsuspected, for he who now felt himself whole was a credible witness of the benefit. Second, that He might not cause the fury of the Jews to be yet more inflamed, for the sight of One whom they envy is wont to kindle

not a small spark in malicious persons. On this account He retired, and left the deed by itself to plead its cause among them.” Chrysostom went on to say that envy disables the eyes of the soul and endangers the salvation of him who is possessed by it (Homily xxxvi on John 5).

Delving more deeply into the sin that was the cause of the paralysis, Chrysostom stated that when the soul is diseased, we often feel no pain. “Therefore, God oftentimes punishes the body for the transgressions of the soul, so that by means of the scourging of the inferior part, the better part also may receive some healing.” But yet “this man had not sinned for as many years as he suffered (he was paralyzed for 38 years, v.5), for he had spent a whole lifetime in the length of his punishment. For sins are not judged by time but by the nature of the transgression... Besides this, we may see another thing, that though we have suffered severely for former sins; if we afterwards fall into the same, we shall suffer much more severely. And with good reason; for he who is not made better even by punishment, is afterwards led as insensible and as a despiser to still heavier chastisement. The fault should of itself be sufficient to check and to render more sober the man who once has slipped; but when not even the addition of punishment effects this, he naturally requires more bitter torments.”

”What then’, says one, ‘do all diseases proceed from sin?’ Not all, but most of them; and some proceed from different kinds of loose living since gluttony, intemperance and sloth produce such like sufferings. But the one rule we have to observe is to bear every stroke thankfully, for they are sent because of our sins.”

Chrysostom also pointed out that Jesus did not say, “Behold you have suffered a sufficient punishment for your sins”; but, “Behold you have been made whole. Sin no more...” (v.14). For He declared not to him that he was delivered after suffering the deserved amount of punishment, but that through lovingkindness he was made whole. Also, by saying “sin no more...,” He revealed His Divinity and showed that He knew all the transgressions that had been formerly committed by him (Homily xxxvii on John 5).

Many people today are in the same condition as the paralytic. We are all paralyzed by sin to varying degrees; but the lesson here is that we should never give up hope. The Lord is aware of our own unique situations. If even the hairs of our head are all numbered (Matthew 10:29-31) and not one of them falls without our Father’s knowledge (Luke 21:16-19), certainly He is aware of our infirmities and has allowed them in order to strengthen our faith. For it is by our patience that we possess our souls (Luke 21:19; 1 Corinthians 9:24; Hebrews 12:1).

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EPISTLE LESSON - Acts 9:32-42

Today's Epistle lesson is the third in a seven part series describing the development of Christianity after the Resurrection.

In our Epistle lesson, we begin with some of Peter's early missionary journeys. He was not far from home here: Lydda, Joppa, Caesarea, and the Plains of Sharon (see map). But later on Peter traveled extensively: Asia Minor, Italy, Egypt, Africa, even Britain, never staying too long in one place.

The date of the Epistle lesson is sometime between 31 AD (the martyrdom of Stephen in Acts 7) and 44 AD (the famine in the days of Claudius and the martyrdom of James Zebedee in Acts 11:28; 12:2). During the period, the Apostle Paul was converted c. 34 AD (Acts 9:1-18), went to Arabia (Galatians 1:17), returned to Jerusalem three years later c. 37 AD (Galatians 1:18), and finally was sent to Tarsus (Acts 9:30). With Paul the Jewish zealot pacified, "the churches throughout Judea, Galilee and Samaria had peace and were edified" (Acts 9:31). Thus, the setting for the Epistle lesson must be the late 30's AD. For more discussion of these dates, see the Epistle lesson for the 20th Sunday after Pentecost (Galatians 1:11-19).

As Peter traveled around, he healed the paralytic Aeneas, telling him to take up his bed and walk, just like the Lord had told the paralytic by the pool of Bethesda in today's Gospel lesson. This happened in Lydda, which is at the Southern end of the 50 mile long Plain of Sharon. Thus the Twelve, the foundation of the Church and ultimately the New Jerusalem (Revelation 21:14), have begun acting in the place of the Lord at the direction of the Head of the Body. Aeneas may have been well known, because people from considerable distances came to see Peter and turned to the Lord (Acts 9:35). Since the Plain of Sharon is located in Samaria, many of these new converts may have been Gentiles, thus setting up the "Gentile Pentecost" of Acts 10 in Caesarea at the Northern end of the Plain of Sharon.

John Chrysostom noted that the circumstances of the healing of Aeneas were similar to that of the Paralytic in the Gospel lesson. Peter did not wait for an expression of faith on the part of Aeneas just as the Lord had done with the Paralytic. And the results were similar: the miracle served as an exhortation to many (v.35). "All who dwelt at Lydda and Sharon...turned to the Lord" (Homily xxi on Acts 9).

In our Epistle lesson, while Peter was in Lydda after healing Aeneas, Tabitha died in Joppa. The disciples in Joppa therefore sent two men to get Peter in nearby Lydda. When Peter arrived, he again imitated His Master in raising Tabitha as he had in healing Aeneas. Peter remembered how the Lord had raised Jairus' daughter: first He had everybody leave the room

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except Jairus, his wife and Peter, James and John. With the tumult, commotion and ridicule outside, Jesus taught Peter to seek the Lord in the quietness of prayer (Mark 5:37-42). In our Epistle lesson, Peter did the same thing (Acts 9:40-41) after putting all the weeping widows out of the room.

This was not the first time Peter had been to Samaria. He and John had been sent to Samaria earlier by James (and the apostles in Jerusalem) in response to the preaching of Deacon Philip in c. 32-33 AD (Acts 8:14). On their return to Jerusalem, Peter and John had preached in many Samaritan villages (Acts 8:25). However, Deacon Philip's preaching took place in the city of Samaria (or Sebaste), which is about 15 miles East of the Plain of Sharon. Peter and John had laid hands on Deacon Philip's converts then such that they received the Holy Spirit in what is sometimes called "The Samaritan Pentecost" (Acts 8:17); today we call this receiving of the Holy Spirit "chrismation." Most of these people were probably "half-Jews" as Samaritans were called.

Peter stayed quite a while in Joppa (Acts 9:43) as a result of the large number of converts from the healing of Aeneas and the raising of Tabitha (9:36-42).

Another prominent resident of Lydda around this time was Joseph of Arimathea. After he and Nicodemus, both members of the Sanhedrin, performed the burial service for Jesus, they became persona-non-grata in Jerusalem and had to leave town. Joseph settled in Lydda and helped start the church there before going to Gaul and Britain. Later bishops of Lydda were Amplias and Zenas who worked with the Apostle Paul (Romans 16:8; Titus 3:13) and who were two of the original members of the Seventy (Luke 10:1-17).

Next week we will pick this up again with Photina (or Photini), the Samaritan woman Jesus met at the well in Sychar, and with the men from Cyprus and Cyrene who started preaching to Gentiles in Antioch.

Prayers for the Dead

Regarding Tabitha, besides comparing her to Jairus' daughter, Chrysostom notes the faith of the disciples in Joppa. Why did they wait until she was dead? Why wasn't Peter solicited earlier? So right-minded were they, they did not think it proper to trouble the disciples about such matters and to take them away from the preaching.

Chrysostom went off on a bit of a tangent in commenting on this. He began with how inappropriate the tears were in Joppa. "If the Emperor were to send and invite some one of us to the palace, would it be right, I ask, to weep and mourn? Angels are present, commissioned from heaven, sent from the King Himself to call their fellow servant (Tabitha); and say, do you weep? Do you not know what a mystery it is that is taking place, how awful, how dread, and worthy of hymns and praise?...Like the spectacle of the Emperor as he comes in state to take possession of the city is the soul having left the body and departing in company with angels. Think what the soul must then be! In what amazement, what wonder, what delight! Why do you mourn?"

On the other hand, given "a man who has lost all the labor of a whole life: not one day has he lived for himself, but only to luxury, to debauchery, to covetousness, to sin, to the devil. Shall we not bewail this man? Shall we not try to snatch him from his perils? For it is, yes, it is

possible, if we will, to mitigate his punishment, if we make continual prayers for him; if for him we give alms. Has he no alms-deeds of his own to exhibit? Let him have at least those of his kindred, which are done for him. The more sins he has to answer for, the greater need he has of alms; not only for this reason, but because the alms have not the same virtue now, but far less. For it is not all the same to have done it himself, and to have another do it for him. Even this pertains to the mercy of God: widows (like the widows in Joppa) standing around and weeping know how to rescue, not indeed from the present death, but from that which is to come. Many have profited even by the alms done by others on their behalf (Ibid).

Something we often overlook is Jesus reply to the Sadducees when they tested Him regarding the Resurrection. Quoting a very much used passage from the Old Testament, “I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob”, He said, God is not the God of the dead, but of the living” (Matthew 22:32). When He said this, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob had been “dead” c. 1800 years. If they’re not really “dead”, but living somewhere, it behooves us to get in touch with the abode where they are and see things from their point of view.

Map of the Plain of Sharon

The Plain of Sharon is located West of Samaria along the coast of the Mediterranean.

