Christ: the One who Brings Wholeness
John 5:1-18

We're looking at John's gospel, and as we saw last week, get to the end and John tells us why he's writing it - so that we might believe that Jesus really is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing we might have life. But right before that he tells us something else: 'Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, *which are not written in this book*' (John 20:30).

So, he has got a wealth of material, of healings and miracles, he could have included. But he picks these ones. So every time you've got to ask, why did John keep this one? What's the message?

But with today's, you've got to dig deeper still. Because it's not just 'why does John tell us about this healing?' It's 'why did Jesus heal *this* man?'

I mean, look at the scene. Jesus is back in Jerusalem. And John tells us, v2, 'there is in Jerusalem by the Sheep Gate a pool, in Aramaic called Bethesda, which has five roofed colonnades.' And then, John says, v3, 'In these lay *a multitude* of invalids - blind, lame, and paralysed.'

So this would be like walking into a hospital, and walking onto the ophthalmology ward with people sat with bandages round their eyes. And then moving on to the orthopaedic ward, with people crippled from various injuries or birth defects. And from there to the neurological wards, with the paralysed, and those who'd had strokes, or been born with cerebral palsy.

And there aren't just a few such patients sat around, there's a multitude of them. And Jesus walks among that mass of injured, hurting, suffering humanity, stepping over a body here, avoiding a stumbling blind person there, and among them all, he picks out one man to heal.

Why him?

He could have healed them all with a word. Why just this one?

Grace for the Undeserving
Now, how would you define 'a long time'? And if you've got kids, how would they define it? Because when you're young and really want something, waiting a week, or even a day, or an hour, or just a few minutes, can feel like an eternity. So look at v5, 'One man was there who had been an invalid *for thirty-eight years*.'

Longer than some of you have been alive. And did this disability happen to him when he was a child and this is the only life he's known? Or did it happen to him when he was a young man, and his whole adult life has been spent on this hospital bed?

We don't know. What we do know is, v6, 'When Jesus saw him lying there and knew that he had already been there a long time, he said to him, "Do you want to be healed?"'

Outside the front of our house we've got a hedge which is somewhere around 15m long. And every year I've got to trim it. The problem is our next door neighbour - who has now moved away - was a tree surgeon. The kind of guy who trims those immaculate Swiss hedges - not so much as a twig out of place. So I'd always try and wait till he'd gone out before I started - just because I felt judged.

Well, a couple of years ago I decided it'd be much easier if I could shorten the hedge. So I waited for him to go out and then went out with my step ladder and saw.

And there I am, perched on my ladder, with my little saw in hand and metres of hedge in front of me. And I'm about 50cm in, when who comes back up the drive but my neighbour, in his pick-up truck, filled with all his tree surgeon mates. And he winds down the window and says, 'Are you trying to trim your hedge?' And I felt like saying, 'No, I am trying to build a space ship to Mars. What does it look like I'm doing?' But I'm a pastor, so I smiled and said 'yes'. And he, and his mates all smiled back and said, 'I think you need a better tool' and reached down and handed me a pair of secateurs that could cut through anything.

Now is that what Jesus is doing? When he asks the man, 'Do you want to be healed?' is he trying to get the man to reflect on the way he's trying to be healed? That what he's putting his hope in is never going to do it?

Or, is he asking him to reflect on whether he really does want to be healed or not? Because he's been like this for 38 years and has this just become 'normal' for him?

And think how we can be the same. Maybe we want to see some change in our life, or maybe we're looking to something to satisfy us or give us a sense of worth, but is it going to deliver? Or maybe the abnormal has become normal and this sin you're struggling with, or hurt, or bitterness or unforgiveness you're experiencing has become a part of you, and once you might have wished for things to change, but that desire has ebbed away. Or you really do still wish things could change but your hope is growing dim.

So if Jesus asks this man, 'do you want to be healed?' What might he ask us? Do you want to change? Do you want to repent? Do you want to forgive? Or, what you're looking to help you change, or to satisfy you, or to give you a sense of worth - will it *really* give you what you're after?

Look at the man's response: v7, 'The sick man answered him, "Sir, I have no one to put me into the water when the water is stirred up, and while I am going another steps before me."' So he doesn't actually answer the question, does he. In fact, almost certainly subconsciously, he blames others. 'Do you want to get better?' 'Well, other people won't help me get better; other people are just thinking of themselves.'

When Su picks me up on something and says, 'darling, I don't think you should have said that or done that,' is my default reaction, 'Darling, you are right as always, and I want to get better' or, is it 'You don't understand! There's this reason, and that reason, and this person did this and that person said that. And my problem is their fault'?

You see, whether we're dealing with the hurt and harm done to us by others, or with our own sin and selfish choices, the hard truth is we can find ourselves making excuses as to why change is impossible, or even subconsciously seek to shift the responsibility for that change on to others.

And that's the first clue we get that all is not well with this man, and not just with his body.

But there are more. After Jesus heals him, the authorities catch up with him, and tell him he's breaking the law by carrying his mat on the Sabbath, and he says, v11, "The man who healed me, that man said to me, 'Take up your bed, and walk.'"

Is he just recounting what happened, or is he trying once again to shift responsibility, and even subconsciously, in the process, throwing Jesus under the bus?

Then, when the religious leaders ask him 'well, who told you to pick up your bed?' and he doesn't know, having met Jesus in the temple and now he does know, what does he do with that knowledge? Verse 15, 'The man went away and told the Jews that it was Jesus who had healed him.'

Is he just a bit naive and ungrateful and doesn't realise he's putting Jesus at risk? Or is he trying to ingratiate himself with the authorities and is *willing* to put Jesus at risk?

And the questions about his character being to mount up.

But it's what Jesus says to him after the healing that's most telling. Verse 14, 'Afterward Jesus found him in the temple and said to him, "See you are well! Sin no more, that nothing worse may happen to you." And the implication is that, in some way, his disability was as a result of his sin.

Is that the case for every person? Absolutely not. But is it the case for some? Yes.

I mean, let your imagination run. Maybe as a young man he repeatedly broke into people's houses. But the last time he did it, in trying to get away, he fell from a rooftop and was left paralysed. Or maybe his anger was out of control and one day he provoked a fight that left him like this. Or maybe he was given to stealing donkeys, and one day a donkey kicked him in the head. You could come up with a list of possible reasons for how his sin might be the cause of his sickness.

And maybe that's why Jesus picks him out.

Maybe he's the only man in that multitude of sick and suffering people who has brought this suffering on himself. Maybe, in an honour/shame, you-get-what-you-deserve culture, he deserved the disability that befell him.

Would you have picked him out? And think of his character - his evasiveness, his blame shifting, his lack of personal responsibility, his ingratitude, his throwing Jesus under the bus. Does he appeal to you? If you had the chance to heal one person in that multitude of hurt, wouldn't you pick the most deserving? The one who did *not* deserve this suffering and yet had born it with grace? The one who was most grateful for small mercies and who would do the most good with their new found health?

But Jesus does the opposite. He walks around those colonnades and picks the least deserving person there. Why? Because that is why he's come. As John said in chapter 1, 'From his fulness we have all received, grace upon grace.' (v16). Undeserved favour and healing, and change upon underserved favour and healing and change.

Because it's not just *this* man who is paralysed by his own sin, is it? It's not just him who lies damaged by his bad choices, or selfish ambitions. And if he's physically paralysed by past sin, think how sin and shame, or fear of others or fear of failure, or blaming others and failing to take responsibility, can leave us morally, spiritually paralysed.

And John is saying, yes, but it's for just such people that Christ has come.

The thing is, there are other ways than Christ to try and find wholeness, aren't there.

Two Wrong Ways to Find It

Did you notice how our Bible text jumps from v3 to v5, with v4 relegated to the footnotes? That's because it doesn't appear in the earliest and best manuscripts and so was almost certainly inserted later by someone other than John to try and explain why the people at the pool tried to get in the water when the water was stirred: 'for an angel of the Lord went down at certain seasons into the pool, and stirred the water: whoever stepped in first after the stirring of the water was healed.' (v4).

So it's not just that this man is sick in body and less than well in heart - it's that he's putting his hope for change in a local superstition, in something that's inevitably going to let him down.

And for us, there may be no pool, or moving of the waters, but might there be things we put our hope in that'll never give us the change, or the sense of worth, or heart satisfaction, that we're looking for?

Let's say you look in the mirror and hate what you see. What do you do? Maybe you try the latest diet or sign up for a gym membership. And getting fit and losing weight are good. But they have no power to heal the hurt beneath our self-loathing. And even if they do bring relief, they'll add different problems - like pride, because 'look at me'.

Or maybe you're angry at the way you've been treated, and to restore equilibrium and find wholeness, you try practising mindfulness. And it may give you a semblance of peace, but it can never address the unforgiveness you're struggling with, because mindfulness cannot give you justice.

You see, like this man, we can know we're broken, but also like him we can look to solutions and spiritualities that just can't bear the load we put on them.

But if that's the man, what about the leaders, because they're also looking to something to make them feel good. Verse 9-10, 'Now that day was the Sabbath. So the Jews said to the man who had been healed, "It is the Sabbath, and it is not lawful for you to take up your bed."'

Now, on the other side of us from the tree surgeon, we've recently had new neighbours move in. And they are a really sweet young couple. But last Sunday afternoon, there was a noise coming from their garden, because they were using a high pressure hose to clean their patio. On a Sunday. And was my first reaction, 'I am so happy we have a lovely young couple next to us, who are warm and friendly and care about the state of their house and garden and neighbourhood'? No. It was, 'tut tut, making noise on a Sunday, there are rules about this.' And I realised, Martin you are becoming too Swiss, or old and grumpy, or both.

So look at these leaders. They tell the man he should not be carrying his mat, and he replies, v11, "The man *who healed* me, that man said to me, 'Take up your bed and walk.'" Now, do they go, you've been healed?? That's amazing! How did it happen, who healed you?' No. They ask, v12, "Who is the man who said to you, 'Take up your bed and walk'?"

It's as if they can't see the healing. All they can see is the mat he's carrying. They can't see the grace of God in this man's life. All they can see is a rule that's been broken.

And to carry a burden on the Sabbath was forbidden. The Lord said through Jeremiah the prophet, 'Take care for the sake of your lives, and do not bear a burden on the Sabbath day' (Jer 17:21). But the context is about not working on the Sabbath. Because the whole point of the Sabbath was to say, look you were slaves in Egypt, and under your previous master you were never allowed to rest, or put down your burdens. But now God is your master, and in his kingdom, you can rest, so one day a week, put down your work and lay down your burdens.

So if this man worked for a furniture removal company and he was carrying a bed, he would have been breaking the law. But he's not! He's been paralysed, for 38 years, so this is not a time for law-keeping score-counting, this is a time for rejoicing.

So why don't the religious officials see it that way? Because they've added layer upon layer of additional laws to God's law. And now, it's not just a burden associated with your work that you can't carry, it's a mat after you've been healed. And they've done it because they don't want to break God's law, because they want to earn God's favour.

And so they're not so different from the man himself are they? He was looking to the moving of the waters to make him whole, that if he could just be first in he would earn God's favour. And they're looking for that same favour, only through keeping the rules.

But if you think about it, it's not just religious people who do that. You see, here, carrying a mat will bring down the attention of the authorities on your head, but how about, in our secular culture, using the wrong pronouns, or failing to affirm someone's lifestyle, or holding a political view others see as regressive? And if religious people keep the rules to earn God's favour, think how someone who's not religious might keep the rules to earn the favour of others. And if these religious leaders feel good about themselves because of their morality, think how a secular person might feel good because of their morality and they're not like those judgmental religious people.

So the gods may have changed, and the rules may have changed, but the seeking favour and approval by rule keeping, and feeling good about yourself by doing so, has not.

And so in putting this miracle in front of us, John wants us to see that neither superficial spiritualities or superstitions or rule-keeping legalism, religious or secular, can really heal what's wrong with us.

But there is One who can.

The One Who Makes Whole

So Jesus asks the man 'Do you want to be healed?', he responds vaguely, so, v8-9, 'Jesus said to him, "Get up, take your bed, and walk." And at once the man was healed.'

So despite his years of suffering, and what those years had done to him, there's still healing and wholeness to be had. And he doesn't need stories about angels ruffling the waters, or religious leaders coming with their rule books. He just needs Jesus to speak to him. And when he does, he is instantly healed.

But, v16-17, ‘This was why the Jews were persecuting Jesus, because he was doing these things on the Sabbath. But Jesus answered them, “My Father is working until now, and I am working.”’ Which enflames the leaders further - v18, ‘This was why the Jews were seeking all the more to kill him, because not only was he breaking the Sabbath, but he was even calling God his own Father, making himself equal with God.’

You see the rabbis of the day realised that when God created the universe with his word, and then rested on the seventh day, he didn’t rest because he was tired, but because his work was completed. But they also realised that in some way God continued to work, even on the Sabbath. Because does the world spin off it’s axis once every seven days? Or does the law of gravity suddenly go crazy at the start of every Sabbath? No. Why not? Because even on the Sabbath God continues to sustain all things by his powerful word. And so, as Augustine put it, ‘Only God can work while he rests and rest while he works.’

And yet, here is Jesus saying, ‘and so can I.’ Because if God spoke the universe into being with his word and made it complete, so here Jesus just speaks the word and makes this man whole and complete. And if God alone continues to work on the Sabbath, so here is Jesus saying, as my Father does, so do I. And the religious leaders know that is nothing short of a claim to be equal with God.

But as Paul writes, ‘Though he was in the form of God, [Christ] did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped [something to be held on to and used for his own advantage], but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant.’ (Phil 2:6-7).

And the One equal to God became one like us, and entered our world of suffering. And he does it, so not just this man, but all of us, can find wholeness and healing as we hear him speak his word to us.

You see, Jesus finds this man in the temple after he’s healed and says to him, v14, “See, you are well! Sin no more, *that nothing worse may happen to you*.” Is that a threat, that if he sins again, next time his paralysis will be worse? No. He’s in the temple, somewhere, in all likelihood, he hasn’t been for 38years. But if he doesn’t turn from his life of sin, it’s not just a lifetime he’ll be excluded from God’s presence for - but an eternity.

And it’s that that Jesus has come to rescue us all from. Because at the cross he experiences the worse thing that could happen to this man, or us, so that we might experience the endless good thing. And he was cut off from the presence of God so that we might be brought in. And his body was broken so we can be made whole.

Because if Jesus says to this broken man, ‘get up and walk,’ on the first Easter Sunday Christ got up and walked - not from a sick bed but a death bed. And his getting up, his resurrection tells us there is healing and wholeness to be had in him and, if we will listen to his word, hope for change can walk again.

And that’s a much better hope than superficial spirituality or rule-keeping can ever offer you.