

High up on a plateau, overlooking Jerusalem, is the Temple;  
the meeting place; greeting place and the beating heart of Judaism.  
Into its outer courts the world may come, for it is a market place;  
a commercial machine that furnishes the privileged life of the Temple's inner circle.  
Even the unclean, women and gentiles may come here.  
It is upon the altars of the inner courts that sacrifices are made,  
that sins are atoned for, lamps lit and water poured;  
where purity is bought and sold, cleanliness demanded,  
where blood is spilled, for he is a jealous God.

In the very centre of the Temple lies the Holiest of Holies  
hid behind the veil that separates humankind from the unseen God;  
Yahweh, upon whom no mortal eye may rest.  
The God of Isaiah's vision, high on his throne.  
*Holy, holy, holy*, surrounded by wings and fluttering seraphs,  
incense rising with priestly prayer.  
This is Jerusalem's most holy place where only the bare-footed priests may approach.

Far below the Temple, on the edge of the city is the Sheep-gate  
and alongside is the pool called, in Hebrew, Bethzatha with its five porticoes.  
If you were to walk down the hill to this place, you would see, under those porticoes,  
the brokenness of the city;  
for here are the blind, the lame and crippled, the diseased,  
the imperfect, the unclean, the unwelcome.  
They are, for others, a reminder of the vengeful God,  
for their brokenness is punishment for their sinfulness.  
They may not approach the inner courts of the Temple, for they are not welcome.  
And so they are banished to the dark, shadowy places in the city below.  
For them, there is no atonement;  
for them there are no sacrifices great enough for their healing.  
They are rejected, despised, living on the edges, the margins of a society that cannot look on them.  
Here at Bethzatha, the *House of Disgrace* or *Shame*  
the porticoes shelter the hollow-eyed emptiness of shame and disgrace.  
And they wait and they watch as they have done day after day  
for it is said that when the waters stir, they will bring healing.  
And if you were to wait with them, you would see them;  
the invalids and cripples, the blind and the leprous

struggling down to bathe in the stirring waters,  
their rags and bony limbs and desperate eyes  
longing to be washed and made clean,  
yearning for a place in a society that has rejected them..

Today, high up on the hillside, there is a festival in the Temple.  
The Jews are gathering around their God.  
From far and wide they come, making their journey up,  
up to the altars, the priests and Levites, the scribes and Pharisees,  
to the lights, the water, the noise and the blood of sacrifice.

God is stirring in his Temple.  
Below, they know nothing of this.  
God has no interest in them or for them.  
They lie in the shadows waiting for the waters to stir  
and among them, one who has waited for thirty-eight years;  
paralysed, forgotten, time after time in the desperation of countless broken bodies  
heaving themselves into the water.  
He cannot make the journey alone and there is no one, no, not one  
who will help him down into the miraculous pool.  
While up in the Temple, God is stirring.  
He is beyond the reach of these desperate ones,  
separated by half a city and a religion where they must take the blame  
for their damaged bodies and broken hearts.  
But God is stirring.  
God is stirring and here he comes,  
walking through the porticoes among them.

He stops by the paralysed man.  
*Do you want to be healed?* he asks  
*Do you want to be made well?*  
*I have no one to help me,* says the man.  
*They all go ahead of me.*

For thirty-eight years he has waited for help.  
for thirty-eight years he has believed that his healing will come from the stirring waters.  
For thirty-eight years he has longed to be washed clean and made pure;

to be made whole and restored to a society that has rejected him,  
to return to a Temple from which he is banished  
and to a God who has forsaken him.

*Take up your mat and walk.*

He does not recognise that the man who says this to him is the all-seeing God;  
the Word made flesh, the great I AM  
who first spoke the universe into being in the beginning and breathed life into his creation.  
This man has recreated him  
and out of his brokenness, he has brought him new and whole  
renewed, restored, returned to his people and to his God.  
The Pool of Shame and Disgrace becomes the pool of Grace.\*

At times *we* are the broken ones;  
our pain isolates us, cuts us off from one another and from God.  
Our pain separates us, makes us ask *Why? What have I done? Why me?*  
Grief makes us question who we are  
when that beloved one is gone or that relationship is broken,  
or when we have to adjust our lives to new limitations.  
Fear paralyses us, stops us reaching out or moving on.  
We cannot reach the waters of healing;  
those waters that the Samaritan woman found, not in Jacob's well,  
nor in the pool at Bethzatha  
but in the Spirit of he who sat by the well,  
he who walked among the brokenness in the shadows of the porticoes.  
For *here* is the Temple.  
This is *God's* Temple, not the Temple erected by the pride of humankind.  
This Jesus in whom the Spirit of God abides,  
who comes to us, heals us and restores us and abides in us.  
Amen

*\*Bethzatha/Bethesda in Hebrew means 'Shame/disgrace', but also 'Grace'*