

The Pool at Bethesda - John 5.1–9

2019 BC. Before Covid.

Sometimes huge events; global, national or personal, catastrophic, awesome, tragic or beautiful,

mark a point in time, a change, a loss – or gain -

a turning point in our journey

to such an extent, that when we look back

we perceive a before and after:

pre-war/post-war, before covid/after covid,

for some of us, before ordination/after ordination.

For good or ill, these events cast a shadow,

remain a presence in our lives –

if that ‘event’ happens to be the death of a loved one ...

there is a strange phenomenon, perhaps you have experienced it,

that sense that, at times, their absence can feel like a presence,

somehow even more palpable.

Think of the British population in the years after the war

when lives had been lost or changed forever.

Or some of our children or young people after Covid,

still living with the shadow it cast on their lives.

Following any these life-events, or as one writer describes them, life-quakes,

we have to re-adjust, re-connect with the person we were before the event,

re-establish our identity in changed circumstances,

living with and alongside the memories of what or who was before.

We have to process our grief.

We have to make decisions about the new direction our journey will take.

It's helpful to bear this in mind when we approach John's gospel.

The gospel is written in the years after the Fall of Jerusalem

and the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 AD.

The Temple plays a crucial role in all the gospels,

it was the focus of first century Judaism,

and locus of the presence of God,

the place people flocked to from countries around

for the festivals, the worship, the sacrifices, rituals and atonement.

Jesus spends time in the Temple, speaking, teaching and challenging its leadership

For the Johannine community, from which we believe John's gospel comes,

the Temple had been a central part of its faith practices.

The earliest Christians, after all, were a sect or cult within mainstream Judaism.

So John's gospel is a theological working out of the new identity

of the early Christian community/church.

And, of course, all the other Jewish communities were doing the same thing;

trying to work out who they were, and how they could be who they were, without the temple.

The shadow of the Temple is ever present in the gospel,

deeply embedded in the psyche of the community and the writers.

The Pools of Bethesda could also be said to be in the shadow of the Temple, which would have towered over them to the south. The ruins now are also in the shadow of the 12th century Crusader church of St Anne. Some of us were privileged to visit this site in 2016 and again in 2019 as part of diocesan pilgrimages to the Holy Land. On a pavement outside the church, overlooking the pools, we recalled this story of the paralysed man during a healing service. At the end of the service, we offered individual prayer and anointing to the members of our pilgrim party. It was watching these fellow travellers, listening to their longings, their sorrows and joys, hopes and fears that the gospel story began to unfold in real time and I saw all those people under the porticoes, the sick, diseased, disabled and the paralysed, all waiting for a movement of the pools, that they might enter the waters and be healed. These were the people who were not deemed fit to soil the steps of the temple, even if they had been able to drag their broken bodies up the hill. They were denied access to the building, its rituals, the festivals, and proximity to the presence of the God of Israel hidden behind the veil in the centre of the Temple, the holiest of holies.

But, and here's the wonderful thing, the irony, the delicious protest of God. God will not be contained in the Temple. God pulls aside the veil, steps out of the Holiest of Holies. Out of the Temple and Jesus makes his way down the hill to the Pools of Bethesda. There he walks among those sick, the diseased and disabled people below; those kept on the margins, excluded from decent society. There he encounters the paralysed man and the paralysed man encounters God.

What I didn't realise back in 2016, was that four years later I would not be, as I had imagined then, a parish priest, but a hospital chaplain. And if any passage of the Bible speaks to me about what a chaplain is called to do, it's this story of God coming out of the Temple into the messiness and brokenness of human existence to do God's creative work of remaking, healing broken humanity. But it speaks to me of the Church, too. This fabulous building we are gifted was raised up to the glory of God, not for God's benefit, and not to be the place where God is kept hidden away, the place where just we have exclusive access. The rituals we share, the coming together, the prayer the worship and singing, listening to the word, to the stories of God and how God meets us in this world God made, for the love of it, how we meet at his table and encounter God in bread and wine – all this is to remind us of who we are; the body of Christ, and that we encounter God in all these things and in one another, for we are all made in his image. We are not called only to come together once a week. We are called to come together to be nourished,

to nourish one another, to be resourced, encouraged, inspired,
fed, loved and blessed,
so we can go out into the world,
even to places and people
whose lives are messy, broken, imperfect – and that's most of us!
To encounter, to draw aside the veil
and reveal the God at the heart of each one of us,
that divine spark that is the image of God,
so others too, can encounter Jesus, the image of God in them,
and be healed and held as we are healed and held.
We don't live with the shadow of the temple, or the shadow of the church.
We live in the shadow of Christ, who is the Temple of God.