

## Year C Easter 6

Acts 16: 9-15

Rev 21: 10, 22- 22:5

John 5: 1-9

We Brits have the habit of saying things in a roundabout way, in other words saying one thing and often meaning the exact opposite, all the while knowing full well that the person we are speaking to and anyone else in earshot will understand exactly what we mean. Let me give you a few examples – with the greatest respect, that’s one way of putting it, that’s brave, very interesting, I’m sure it’s my fault, you must come for supper, even how do you do?

What a contrast to Jesus. Some people seem to get it into their heads that Jesus had some British connection. Can you imagine Jesus saying any of the above phrases? I can’t. What Jesus did have was the knack of asking the putting you on the spot questions that are so direct they make you squirm because you don’t really want to answer them.

Here's a few examples. Who do you say that I am? Do you love me? Do you still not understand? Why are you afraid?

And the brutally direct question to the paralysed man at the Pool of Bethesda in today’s Gospel reading is perhaps the most in your face question of them all. No small talk, no nothing, just straight in with ‘Do you want to get well?’ This was a place where the chronically sick and disabled lay, apparently believing that an angel would at random times stir up the waters and the first person would get healed.

This man, who can’t walk and so can’t get into the pool quickly, has been there for 38 years and has probably organised his life as well as he can in the circumstances, rather like some of the people you can often see along Princes Street in Edinburgh or in any city around the world. No doubt there are regular passers-by who either give him food and drink directly or money to enable him to buy some refreshment.

Then along comes this complete stranger and says do you want to get well. How would you feel if you were in the same position as that man and had been chronically ill for almost four decades and unable to do what other people took for granted?

What would you think lay behind the question? Well, if the political climate in this country, and not only here, is anything to go by, you might feel that the questioner was implying that you could do more to help yourself, that you were happy living off other people’s handouts, that you were so wrapped up in your identity as being helpless that you couldn’t imagine your life without your illness.

Would you feel insulted by the question, or deep down might you acknowledge that there might be a grain of truth that makes you feel uncomfortable?

Let me make myself clear. In the Gospels Jesus always shows compassion for the sick and disabled, so here it was not a question of blame and shame, nor a question of suggesting that he was to blame for his sickness, a mistaken attitude of many people at the time that Jesus went out of his way to dispel.

No, I think we should take Jesus's question at face value. As a man of huge compassion, what would Jesus have seen in this man? Well, probably a sense of resignation, maybe, a feeling of despondency, an air of such hopelessness that he can't even say what he wants. Because he doesn't answer Jesus' question at all, rather he gets defensive and explains why he can't get into the pool quick enough.

Because the question that Jesus really asks isn't so much about the man's circumstances, more, as it was with blind Bartimaeus, what do you want me to do for you.

And that brings us to today. Has Jesus ever asked you that same question – what do you want me to do for you? Do you want me to get rid of all the stuff that hobbles you, that stops you living the abundant life I came to give you, the stuff that keeps you rooted to a spot where you would rather not be? Because Jesus is always asking us that question, or perhaps a better way of putting it might be Jesus is all ready to respond when we take him at his word that He wants to help us, to do things for us.

And how I might have responded 20, 30 or even 40 years ago, is not how I would respond now. And even now it's really hard to know how to respond because it's hard for us to believe that Jesus takes such a close interest in you or me. The idea that God cares so deeply about what we want, that he wants us to articulate our deepest desires so that he can respond, is actually quite scary. It can be scary to think that God really does want us to be free from the baggage of our past.

When we take time to sit with these truths, we realise that God really does want us to say Yes, even if the man at the pool couldn't bring himself to say Yes directly. The question we need to ask ourselves – and give an honest answer to – is do we really want an encounter with the living God? Are we prepared to live with the changes such an encounter might bring?

Our problem, and it is our problem, is that actually many of us might feel comfortable in our current state. That if Jesus says to us the equivalent of stand up and walk as he did to the man at the pool, we might feel very uncomfortable, very challenged. Not least, because like the man at the pool, we may never have actually asked to be healed.

And look at it from another perspective. Jesus doesn't ask anything about the man's beliefs, he doesn't refer to the loss of 38 years of potentially productive life, he doesn't even tell him who he is. And Jesus doesn't heal him on his terms by helping him into the pool. He just

heals him on the spot because Jesus can see into his heart and knows what he really wants even if he can't bring himself to articulate it because it seemed so impossible.

And yet, and yet. The man shows no sign of gratitude, no signs of faith, in fact as soon as he learns it was Jesus who healed him, he tells the authorities, presumably in the hope they will stop bothering him about picking up his mat on the Sabbath – so breaking one of the 613 man-made regulations that had grown up like encrusted tentacles around the law.

And that's where the sting in the tail comes. Because Jesus had the nerve to heal on the Sabbath. And that was an affront to the Jews. Not for them the rejoicing that should welcome such a life-changing moment for a person whose life had been so confined up until that moment. They refused to take on board Jesus' essential point that the Sabbath was made for man, not the other way round.

Now presumably Jesus could have found someone more 'deserving' to heal, but he didn't. And he could have done it on another day, but he didn't. All he was doing was, as John puts it elsewhere, doing what he saw his Father doing.

In this day and age of course, Sunday cannot be Sabbath for everybody, so we have to find our own way of honouring Sabbath, in other words honouring God but not necessarily on a Sunday.

So, what do we take from this? Above all that it is Jesus's very nature to want to make new and make well. And that he doesn't differentiate between the deserving and the undeserving. His desire is for everyone to be made well. And that's a point emphasised in our other readings. Revelation talks of a tree for the healing of the nations, Psalm 67, the Psalm for today, talks about all the peoples a multiplicity of times in just a few verses, while in Acts Paul has a vision that sends him hurrying off to Macedonia without a second thought.

So, God is a universal God, deeply committed to the wellbeing of each and every one of us. Our job is to find a way to find to say yes when Jesus asks us the question, he asked that man at the pool. Do you want to get well?