

CHANGE OR DECAY

John 5:1-9

May 1 2016

In John Chapter 5 we are told that Jesus came to Jerusalem and entered the city by the Sheep Gate before going to the pool of Bethesda nearby.

The Sheep Gate still stands today. It was called the Sheep Gate because shepherds would drive their sheep into Jerusalem through this gate and on over to the Pool of Bethesda, where they would be washed before taking to the temple for sacrifice.

The pool of Bethesda was separated by a dividing wall in the middle, creating two bodies of water. The sheep were washed at one end of the pool, and people bathed at the other end.

Around the sides of the pool where the people bathed, there were five porches – big arches - and, underneath them, people who were sick, blind, lame or paralyzed gathered in the hope of being healed.

So why on earth would they do that?

Turned out that the pool of Bethesda was fed by an underground spring, and when the spring overflowed, it would bubble up from beneath causing a disturbance in the waters above.

In Jesus' day there was a legend going about that this rippling of the waters was caused by the fluttering of angels' wings, so that the first person to enter the choppy water would be cured.

According to John, on this day Jesus meet a man who had been coming to the pool of Bethesda for thirty-eight years in hopes of being healed, but because he was paralyzed, he had no means of getting into the water on his own, much less getting there first.

Jesus asked him, "Do you want to get well?"

The sick man answered him, "*Sir, I have no one here to put me into the pool when the water is stirred up, while I am trying to get in, somebody else gets there first.*"

Jesus said to him, "Get up, pick up your mat, and walk."

Immediately, the man got well; he picked up his mat and started walking.

That's what we heard.

And how is this for an opening line from Jesus....?

He meets a man, paralysed for 38 years and he says...

"Do you want to get well?" Are you joking?!!!

What a thing to say to such a man...it sounds a bit like an insult.

It sounds sarcastic – it's like Jesus in that moment has suddenly turned Scottish!!

Surely that's an unnecessary question.

We ask them all the time.

Susan reckons I ask them more than most and she may be right.

Someone comes into our house dripping wet, and we say "*Is it raining?*"

Or we see someone dressed up in a coat, hat and scarf heading for the door and we ask "*Are you going out?*"

"Do you want to get well?"

But there was something really important in Jesus' words.

You see that poor man was kidding himself.

Not just because that story about angel wings and the magical healing in the water was obviously just a legend, but because even if it were true, there is just no way that guy could ever be the first to reach that water.

He could lie there every day till he died, but he was always going to be beaten in the race to get to the pool.

He might well hope for healing, but what he was attempting to do would never work.

And so Jesus gives him the chance to change that routine.

Instead of lying around forever, believe that I can help you, and have the courage to take a first step of faith.

Are you prepared for change? Are you ready to do something – or are you prepared to wallow in your misery and look for sympathy from other people?

Doctors will tell you that there are patients who come to see them wanting help and they would sometimes like to use that question of Jesus.

If you want to lose weight, you can do it if you really want to.

If you want to eat more healthily, you can do it if you really want to.

If you want to give up drinking, you can do it if you really want to.

If you want to become fitter, you can do it if you really want to.

It may not be easy, it may be quite hard, but it is possible – if we really want it enough.

We don't need to be stuck. We don't need to stay the same.

Change is inevitable.

Jesus was always bringing change, and its more than a little ironic that the church (his followers!) have often been so slow to embrace change and so reluctant to do new things.

If you have ever been to a funeral you've probably heard or sung the hymn, Abide with Me. (Only the 23rd Psalm is more popular at the crematorium.)

Glasgow minister and hymn writer John Bell once pointed out the line that goes "*change and decay in all around I see...*"

Then he said "*Only a church person could link these two words and come up with a line that says Change is to be likened to Decay - a terrible thing!*"

Maybe instead of Change **and** Decay we should be saying Change **or** Decay.

We need change. Big change. Major change. We have our work cut out.

At this time in history there is strong evidence that Christianity is the most persecuted religious group on earth.

Some of our sisters and brothers face great danger for their faith.

But for most of us here there is no major persecution.

We don't face being bombed or attacked or being made homeless.

We don't face being thrown to the lions.

Christians in this country have a comfortable life for the most part.

But we have our very own major challenge to address.

Which is that people outside the church have a terribly low opinion of who we are and what we are about.

Used to be that people generally had a fairly good opinion of church even if they didn't go.

These days are gone.

Some of it us our own fault some of it is totally **not** our fault. But the fact remains nonetheless.

This is what people actually think - whether we like it or not.

If we are going to be Christians here today we better be ready for a big challenge.

We have to change people's opinions by failing to live up to the stereotypes and demonstrating a real, live, fresh and relevant Christianity.

That's what it means to be a Christian in Scotland in our time.

Joining a church today and being part of a church today should be looked on as a sign of defiance – it's a way of saying that you want to be part of a church that is worth being in,

worth fighting for,

and one that makes a positive difference for good not only in your own life but in the life of our world.

We need a church that is willing to move and to embrace new ideas and actions – not because all ideas and programmes and changes are good (they aren't) but because we need to change church to make it better.

And a church that refuses any change is going to die.
Growth is the only proof of life.

Steve Aisthorpe is employed by the Church of Scotland as the Mission Development Worker for the Highlands and Islands.
He's written a book called *The Invisible Church*.

This book (*The Invisible Church*) is not even out yet, (there's a joke in there somewhere!) so I haven't read it, but wee snippets have appeared in the media.

He is doing a study of people who have left church but who still consider themselves to be people of faith and followers of Jesus.

One of his chapters concerns the link between the church and 'changes'.
He's collected a whole lot of stats on this.

20 or so years ago 1/5 of people who left church were citing changes as the reason for their leaving.
But nowadays there's strong evidence that what is taking a great many people out of the church is the **lack** of change – the church's determination to be stuck in the past and a reluctance look at new ideas and ways of working.

We may take on things that don't work,
and sometimes we may have to drop some new ideas,
but if we are not prepared to do anything different and move forward our church will not have a future.
These words apply to all congregations.

Notice how that healing worked – the man and Jesus in partnership.
It was the power of Jesus that healed the man but the sick guy had a part to play.
He had to show faith and trust in Jesus and take a step forward – in his case a literal step forward.
Jesus did the rest.

Our success in healing 'church' does not depend on our own ideas or simply down to hard graft on the part of you and I.
Our success in building an inclusive, caring, serving and worshipping community comes down to the blessing and the power of God.

But God still chooses to work with us and we have to be ready to be open to what God is saying and willing to take a step of faith.
We need God. But God needs us to do our bit.

But there's more than a message for our church in here today.

There's a message for you and me as individuals too.

Do you want to get well?

Let's go back to the story.

The man in that story was kidding himself. He was locked into a routine but it wasn't going to help him.

And Jesus didn't believe there was magic in the water either. He didn't waste time lifting the man over there.

Instead he told the man to walk – walk away from the pool- leave it behind.

Jesus encouraged the man to start heading in a new direction.

If we want to be the best versions of ourselves there are times when we need to move away from situations that hold us back and move forward on a new road.

“Do you want to get well?” asks Jesus.

Because if you do, you may need to step out of your comfort zone and take a leap of faith and venture out into the unknown.

If you're determined to stay where you are whatever the cost

and hold on tightly to what you have,

you may well be closing the door to the possibilities God has in store for you.

In the final analysis, this question of Jesus is a question only you can answer.

You can start by asking yourself, what do I need to be healed of?

What's my impediment? Is it self-imposed?

What's standing in your way?

What sort of things do you need to change about your life in order to be whole?

Are there things you need to let go of?

Are you holding on to anger, nursing some injustice or hurt from years back?

Are you holding on to grief, looking back to something (or someone) you once held dear?

Are you holding on to a destructive habit, wanting to be healthy and whole, but not willing to stop smoking or drinking or surfing or eating or gambling your time away?

The story has a positive ending.

Jesus says to the man, *“Get up, pick up your mat and walk.”*

This is the gospel for all of us.

“I have come that you might have life – life in all its fullness”

God's will for all of us is that we may live our lives to the full, that we can become all that there is in us to be.

Our reading today gives us the same question to answer.

“Do you want to be made well?”

Do you want the church to be all that it can be?
Do you want your life to be all that it can be?

And if we want to take a step forward, God has the power to help us.

When Jesus told the man to “walk” it didn’t make any sense.
But it was exactly what he needed to do to get unstuck.

The word, “walk” is what we need to hear too.
Our focus, needs to be on what God wants for us.
The man’s hope, my hope, and your hope
is when we walk toward God.