

Ps 142:4,5
Ps 85:2
Ps 116:1,2,3,4
Ps 118:4,5
Hy 56:1-4
John 5:1-23
Exodus 31:12-17
2 Corinthians 4:16-5:1
John 5:17

Yarrow, February 14, 2010

Beloved Congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ!

The words before us are puzzling, to say the least. They're puzzling specifically because the work Jesus was referring to in our text was done on the Sabbath; vs 16: "He had done these things on the Sabbath." Yet of the Sabbath God has once said: "six days shall work be done, but the seventh day is a Sabbath of solemn rest, holy to the Lord; whoever does any work on the Sabbath shall be put to death" (Ex 30:15). And again: "whoever does any work on it, that soul shall be cut off from among his people" – excommunicated. So: why did Christ do this healing on the Sabbath?? Or are we to think that He somehow ignores God's command?

As it turns out, beloved, our Saviour did not transgress His God's commands about the Sabbath. What He did instead was demonstrate for His people of all ages what work the Lord God has been doing since the beginning. Here is pointed up that God has been busy, working for the redemption of His chosen people. To point that out, Jesus needed to do this healing on the Sabbath.

I summarise the sermon with this theme:

IN BETHESDA CHRIST FORESHADOWS THE HEALING OF ALL THE DISABLED.

1. What God does at Bethesda
2. Why God does it
3. So what

1. What God does at Bethesda

The Father, says Jesus in our text, "has been working". These words of Jesus could make us think of anything and everything that Almighty God has done since the creation of the world. And indeed, with our text we shall have to think of all the many things God has been doing since the beginning. Yet to understand our text well, we shall have to recall first of all the context in which Jesus spoke these words; what particular work of His Father was He referring to when Jesus spoke these words?

We are to note that Jesus speaks the words of our text to the Jews, speaks them after the Jews had accused Jesus of transgressing the Sabbath when He healed that invalid at Bethesda. That context suggests, then, that the work of God to which Jesus refers in our text is first of all *the actions of the Father at Bethesda* itself. It includes more, yes (as we shall see), but refers in first instance to the work of God in Bethesda on this particular Sabbath. What, then, has God been doing in this place? What details are revealed in the passage around our text about the work of the Father at the pool?

a. There is, brothers and sisters, first of all God's work in relation to the invalid himself. 38 years before the events of our passage occurred, God sovereignly let a man of Israel become sick, lame in his legs. In the course of those 38 years, Almighty God sustained this man on his bed so that he did not die, did not get better either; despite any medical help this man may have sought in the course of those 38 years, God caused this man to remain physically handicapped. More, God directed him to this pool close to the Sheep Gate to join a multitude of other invalids. God placed this sick man here to await the day of Jesus' arrival.

b. Beside this work of God involving the sick man, God also worked in the pool. He maintained this pool, caused it to keep existing; more, He caused the waters in the pool to be troubled from time to time. How God did so is not important. It may be –as popular belief apparently held– that He sent an angel on occasion to move the waters. It may also be that He used the bubbling action of a spring.

Further, He permitted among the people the belief that the first one in the pool after the waters were troubled should be healed of whatever infirmity that person had (cf vs 7). I say: God *permitted* the people to believe it. For is it so that the healing powers ascribed to this pool were indeed the way the Lord God worked? Is it characteristic of God to grant healing only to the first to scramble into the water? Does God really heal on a "first come, only served" basis? We know: it is not so. We can imagine what happens when the water of the pool is troubled; every individual in that multitude who has some way of scrambling to the pool goes for his life. For only one, only one will be healed. And I want it to be me.... What a pushing and shoving.... Selfishness....

What have we at this pool then? Here is evidence of a distorted understanding of who God is. Here is evidence of a popular belief that God works by magic, and He applies His magic to one person only at any given time. Who the lucky person is to receive that magic? It's the healthiest – he gets to the pool first. Or it's the person who has the help of a friend.

This perception God permitted at Bethesda. For the big majority of those lying there, this belief was cruel. For the chance of being healed was for the desperately ill so little, so very little. Invariably, others would beat them into the water, and they would themselves be again frustrated, disappointed, feel cheated of the health they longed for. That was Bethesda: a place of deep disappointment, a place of hopelessness..., a place rooted in a twisted perception of how God works. But God allowed the place to be there, allowed it to be there so that Jesus might work there.

c. There's more to be said about God's work surrounding this sick man. God placed him in Bethesda, that place where one dreamed of health and felt cheated day after day. But Bethesda, we are to know, was located beside the Sheep Gate in the city of Jerusalem. The Sheep Gate was located in turn next to the temple; in fact, the sheep used for the sacrifices in the temple all came through the Sheep Gate. The sick man of our chapter, then, as well as the rest of the crowd of sick people, saw day after day the sheep that were meant specifically for sacrifice in the temple. For the pious Israelite, such sheep were a constant reminder of the forgiveness of sins spelled out by these sacrifices. Sin: *that*, the Israelite could know from God's Old Testament revelation, was the cause of all misery, was the ultimate cause of their sicknesses and handicaps. In Paradise there had been no sickness; blindness, lameness, paralysis: all of these were bitter fruits of that tragic fall into sin. And God's promise in the Old Testament was this: with forgiveness of sins comes restoration of life also; forgiveness means that one is reconciled to God, means also that the bitter consequences of sin are taken away. It's prophesied by Isaiah: even the lame will be able to catch the prey, more, no inhabitant of God's New Jerusalem will be sick. And –adds Isaiah– why not? It's because "the people who dwell in it will be forgiven their iniquity" (33:23f). The sick of Bethesda saw these sheep meant for the sacrifices. *God* caused them to see the sheep meant for sacrifice, and so *God* reminded these sick Israelites of the cause of their misery, reminded them also of the only way to be healed of their illnesses. It was no accident, and it was not without purpose, that the Lord God had this pool placed near the Sheep Gate.

But the sick of John 5 did not *work* with the message inherent in those sheep. God directed circumstances in such a way that the day described in our passage was a feast day, and that meant that God's people were to gather in the temple in order to celebrate before the Lord, celebrate specifically the redemption God gave to His people. But the sick man of our chapter –and so many other sick persons with him– was not in the temple, had not organised anyone to get him there. While the multitudes of Israel gathered in the temple next door to Bethesda to rejoice in God's good gifts, the sick man of our chapter stayed put beside the pool. While God wanted His people to focus their attention on the forgiveness He graciously grants them through the shedding of the blood of sheep and goats, this sick man had his attention focused on the pool – would the water move today or would it not? While God wished His children to rejoice in the temple because of the healing He granted them, healing of soul, this man of Israel clung to the pool in the hope, the hope that one day he might be healed in body....

Then yes, we can understand that he would want to be healed; sick for 38 years is a long time. But, beloved, *the man's at the wrong address!* Today's a feast day –the Sabbath– and so he belongs in the temple where forgiveness is spelled out, in the temple where he could be reassured of God's blessing and God's nearness and God's care even in his sickness. But this sick man doesn't understand it, he's content to wait for the waters to be troubled, then to be cheated of health again as someone else beats him.... And God allows it, allows this sick child of His to be so caught up in his pursuit of health that he misses the wealth of the temple. God works, God allows it all –why?– because the stage must be properly set up for the arrival of Jesus Christ, the arrival of the Healer of the nations.

The Father has been working until now, and now the stage is set. Now comes Jesus, the Son, who works with the Father. And in Him is the purpose of the Father's work revealed. That brings us to our second point:

2. Why God does it.

For what does Jesus do in Bethesda on this Sabbath? Of the multitude of invalids lying around the pool, Jesus walks up to that one who had been sick for so many years and strikes up a conversation with him: “do you want to be made well?” With that brief question Jesus confronts this sick man with the hopelessness of his situation, the hopelessness of Bethesda. Healing: that's what the man wanted so desperately, that's why he stayed at Bethesda, waiting, waiting for the waters to move, struggling to be in first, hoping, disappointed, being frustrated, and hoping for tomorrow.... Healing: he longed for it, but always it escaped him; “sir, I have no man to put me into the pool when the water is stirred up; but while I am coming, another steps down before me....” It's all so hopeless.

Here, brothers and sisters, we're to note the *purpose* of what God has done in the life of this man. God has made him sick, God has brought him to Bethesda, God has confronted him with the hopelessness of his situation. It is God who has made that situation as hopeless as hopeless can humanly be *so that now He might carry on His work in Jesus Christ*. For in the face of the hopelessness in which God the Father has placed this sick man, God the Son works healing. Said Jesus to him: “Rise, take up your bed and walk.” And lo, at the word of the Son of God, the man was healed; he “took up his bed, and walked.”

What's this healing all about? What's behind this work of God in Bethesda? The key to that question, brothers and sisters, lies in the fact that God had His work in Bethesda climax *on the Sabbath*. So we shall need to look for a moment at the place and meaning of the Sabbath.

It's after the six days of creation were finished that we read first about a Sabbath; that's when God rested from all the work which He had done (Gen 2:2). Yet God's rest on the Sabbath does not at all mean that He was inactive; it's true that He did not create on the seventh day –He rested– but God was occupied nevertheless with upholding and governing the world He had made. In fact, throughout

the entire Old Testament the Lord God was occupied with that task; day by day He maintained His world, governed it. For what purpose, though, did He maintain and govern His world? Ever since the fall into sin, God maintained His world for one purpose: He maintained it in *order to save it*, He governed all things so that one day the Saviour could come. He sent a flood, so that the Saviour could one day be born. He called Abram out of Ur, set him apart, so that the Christ could come. He brought Jacob back from Haran, delivered Israel from Egypt, granted David as king, sent His people into exile all so that redemption in Jesus Christ might be possible. To His covenant people Israel He gave a tabernacle with its sacrifices and ceremonies, gave the Sabbath itself, for that same reason: so that redemption in Christ might be possible. Throughout the Old Testament the Father worked, and all that work was focused on that redemption He wanted; Calvary is the climax of all God did in the whole Old Testament.

That purpose of God's labour is captured in the concept of the Sabbath. One day in seven was to be a day of rest for Israel, a day in which they were not to work. What they were to do instead on that day? It was Sabbath day –not a holiday– a rest day so that God's own might reflect upon and delight in what God was doing. For *God was working*, was upholding and governing His creation, was granting growth and harvests to His people, giving them houses and contentment –why?– so that one day the Christ might be able to come, come to obtain redemption for His elect. The Sabbath: Israel was to rest, to rest in order that they might have time to focus on and rejoice in the work God was doing, that work of restoring His fallen creation. Here was also the reason why God was so insistent that Israel keep the Sabbath, keep it on pain of death (Ex 31). God rested after He made the creation and was refreshed; His people should rest every seventh day while God was recreating His fallen world, should rest from work and focus their attention on God's recreating work, and so be refreshed, nourished in soul and body for a new week of work with God, working to the coming of the promised Messiah.

On the Sabbath Jesus strode into Bethesda, approached the man who had been sick for 38 years, healed him. True, the man ought not to have been lying there on this Sabbath day; the Sabbath was a day to reflect on the work God was doing in obtaining redemption, and as such he ought to have been in the temple where God's work of redemption was so vividly spelled out. But he wasn't there; this man lay bent under the weight of the consequences of sin, he thirsted for healing for the body and thought the magic of the pool to be his best chance.

Yet to this man Jesus comes, on the Sabbath. God had worked since the beginning, always been working, and the purpose of His work was pointed up in the Sabbath. So today, on the Sabbath, Jesus continued God's work by showing to His broken people just what God's work was all about. God had set the stage, God had prepared the situation so that the circumstances were right for His work to reach its climax through Jesus Christ. Now comes God the Son, and *on the Sabbath* grants healing to this sick man, restoration of life and limb. That restoration of life and limb points up that *in Christ the bitter consequences of the fall into sin are undone*; this man receives health again, receives a *foretaste of Paradise Restored*.

That's what God's work is all about, now and always: always God is busy restoring Paradise – restore it how?– through the forgiveness of sins which the Son would obtain on the cross of Calvary. Sickness is the bitter fruit of the fall into sin; God laboured in Christ to undo the fall into sin, and so to take away also the bitter fruits of that fall. This healing happens *on the Sabbath*, on the Sabbath in order to demand the attention of the people for the redemption God was labouring for in Christ. It happened on the Sabbath, so that God's own might be impressed with the *rest* God wished His own to have, the rest He was pursuing. That work begun 38 years ago in making this man sick, that work of God continued in those 38 long years in keeping the man sick, that work of God in bringing this man to Bethesda and letting him place his hopes for healing in that frustrating pool, that work of God in having the man's eyes closed to the redemption spelled out in the temple: all that work of God came to its

completion when He sent His Son to Bethesda on the Sabbath to spell out to that multitude of invalids that *God had been working and was working still to obtain redemption for His fallen children*. Christ heals the man, and that healing in this setting is proclamation of the gospel, the gospel of God's redeeming work.

That leaves yet the third point:

3. So what

The man walks! But, we understand now, healing was not the ultimate purpose of this miracle. Christ healed this man because He worked with the Father to gain redemption for sinners. Was that message understood by the healed man? And the answer –tragically– is No. The Jews question the healed man about carrying his bed on the Sabbath, and promptly he points a finger at his Healer; 'He told me to carry it, it's His fault.' When later he discovers that his Healer is none other than Jesus, he goes forthwith to the Jews to betray his Healer. Here is not faith, here is no joy in the Lord or thankfulness to God, here is no appreciation for the fact that healing of the body is itself a symbol of the greater miracle of healing for the soul, forgiveness of sins. This man has his legs back, but the evidence suggests that his heart is still dead in sin. Must this be the result of God's work until now, God's work as climaxed today in Jesus Christ?!

But note the words of the Saviour in our text, beloved. Our translation casts Jesus' words concerning the Father into the past tense. Yet Jesus uses the present tense: "My Father is working until now", or: "is working still." This, then, is not the end of the Father's works; He has more, far more to do. In fact, Jesus adds, I keep working too. The Father has been working since the beginning, and He keeps on working, and part of His work included Bethesda; this work of today is part of the preparation needed for the work I will complete on the cross of Calvary.

What then has the Father accomplished in Bethesda? To His people the Jews He has spelled out the purpose of all His work, has spelled out the gospel of redemption. And the result is that the Jews reject His work, reject the gospel, reject the Christ. Vs 16: "for this reason the Jews persecuted Jesus." More, vs 18: "therefore the Jews sought all the more to kill Him." The battle lines were being drawn, the enmity of the Jews of Jerusalem was being lined up against the Christ –why?– so that God might accomplish the work He wished to do through Christ. For Jesus had to go to the cross, had to go by means of these very Jews. It's as Peter said later on to these selfsame Jews: "this Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed" (Acts 2:23). Such was God's plan, such was the way God wished His work to be accomplished: by means of these Jews His Son would be condemned to the cross, hung on that cursed pole so that He might undergo the horrid wrath of God upon the sins of those chosen to life. This was God's plan, and so God worked to carry out that plan; He needed Bethesda in order to prepare the stage for His Son's death on Calvary. With a view to that death this man had to be sick for 38 years....

Christ did His work on Calvary, bore the load of God's wrath, cried out His triumph: "it is finished" (Jn 19:30). With that victory of Christ on the cross, one part of God's redeeming work was done; sins were forgiven, many were reconciled to God.

But even after Calvary, the Father works still and the Son does too. Through the Son the Father continues to uphold and govern His creation, directing the circumstances of private individuals and world superpowers so that the stage is always ready for His church gathering work. Health, sickness, riches, poverty, war, peace: God the Father, through Jesus Christ, directs all events in this world so His kingdom comes. The Son works on too, has poured out His Holy Spirit so that the redemption obtained on Calvary might be applied to sinners, the church be gathered.

What is then the result of God's continuing work? The result is this: those dead in sin are raised to a new life, they're made to enjoy the Sabbath rest of God Most High.

O no, we haven't obtained the fullness of God's redeeming work yet. God works on in the lives of His children, forming, moulding His children through circumstances of sickness or tension, of health or relaxation, preparing them for entry into the eternal Rest of God. For one day His work will be finished, and on that day there shall be no more sickness and no more pain, no more grief and tension either, for every bitter fruit of the fall into sin will be no more. That day of the great Completion of God's work draws near, the everlasting Sabbath soon begins. Today God works in my life and in yours, works in line with what He did long ago at Calvary, what He did at Bethesda.