

TAKE UP YOUR MAT

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Let me begin this morning with a story from my childhood.

When I was 9 I travelled with Mum to Nelson, to stay with my older brother and his family, to care for the children while his wife was in hospital having and caring for twins. I loved going to school down there and making new friends etc, but one memory I have is still as clear as a bell today, as it was 60 years ago. My brother and I were standing in his lounge, and for whatever reason, he called me “a little tub of lard” – I am sure this was a throwaway comment, probably said in brotherly jest, but those 4 words had the effect of paralyzing my self-image for the next 38-40 years.

And this is why our reading this morning, A man healed at the pool of Bethesda resonates with me,

Thirty-eight years was a long time to sit on his mat. Every day was the same. Waiting. Watching. Hoping. Not much changed. Sitting on his mat had become a way of life for the man in today’s gospel. His life was stagnant. He was convinced that life would bubble up outside of him, over there, in that magic pool of water. So he sat on his mat waiting, watching, and hoping that things will change.

There was a belief that this pool of water called Bethesda had healing properties and that it could change one’s life. It was said that every now and then an angel would stir the water, the water would begin to bubble, and the first one in the water would be healed. The man in today’s gospel won’t get up off his mat until he sees the first bubble. He is living an “as soon as” life.

“As soon as the water bubbles then I will get up off my mat. As soon as I get to the water my life will be better. As soon as I get into the water my problems will be fixed.”

I too lived an, “as soon as” life regarding my body-image, which in turn impacted my self-worth.

- As soon as, I lose some weight – I will be confident
- As soon as I get in shape – I will be attractive
- As soon as I can fit into size12 – I will be viewed as worthwhile

I sat for so many years, with the deep sense that my circumstance (my mat) of not being, the waif-like model body-type was the reason for my lack of confidence, feeling frumpy and believing that anything I had to offer was not really of any worth.

Let us look at the pool of Bethesda as an illusion. It convinces us that our life is nothing more than our circumstances. It misleads us into believing that life is to be found outside ourselves. It tricks us into living an “as soon as” life. Most of us know what that is like. We say to ourselves or maybe even out loud to another, “As soon

as this or that happens everything will be better. I'll be happy. My problems will go away. I'll be satisfied. All will be well."

The pool of Bethesda has a strong attraction for us. Children often say, "As soon as I get big, grow up, am an adult" And it continues throughout our life. "As soon as"

I graduate, get a job, get a better job;

I get married or get out of this relationship;

I have more time, more money, a better house;

He changes the way he acts;

She apologizes;

I feel better or get through this time in my life;

They do what I want;

I get through this grief and no longer feel sad;

I lose ten pounds, get in shape.

"As soon as" You can fill in the blank with almost anything. The challenge is, there will always be another pool of Bethesda. Meanwhile life has been put on hold, the pause button has been pushed and we sit on our mat, self-imprisoned by the circumstances of our life.

The imprisonment is so great that when Jesus asks the man, "Do you want to be made well?" the man doesn't even say, "Yes." Instead he offers circumstances and excuses. "I have no one to put me in the water. When the water bubbles others get there first. They cut in before me."

I'm not suggesting that the circumstances of our lives are irrelevant or have no effect. That's just not true. They do affect us. We are, however, more than the circumstances of our life. Life is not to be found outside our various situations or circumstances but within them. To believe something other than this is to live constantly looking for the next pool of Bethesda, the next "as soon as".

Jesus does not help the man get into the water. He comes to him on his mat, the same mat and situation the man so wants to escape, and speaks words of life and resurrection. "Stand up, take your mat and walk." The man does not leave his mat behind. It goes with him. His circumstances are real. The difference is he now carries them. They no longer carry him.

If I go back to my own story, it was the coming to an understanding that the confident, attractive, worthy Ellie had resided in me all the time, and as soon as I got off my mat of weight/shape and clothes size, I was no longer trapped, but set free to walk into a new way of engaging with life.

Jesus doesn't change our outer circumstances. He changes us. He calls us into a new way of being, seeing, acting, speaking, thinking. When we stand and rise to that new life we discover the circumstances have somehow changed.

That doesn't necessarily make life easy or mean we no longer have to deal with the circumstances of life. It makes our circumstances more manageable and we engage with them from a different place and position. The pool of Bethesda is drained of its power over us. There is freedom where there was once imprisonment. Inertia gives way to creativity. Once stagnant waters now bubble with new life.

The life Jesus offers does not happen "as soon as" It happens in this place, at this time, in these circumstances. For those times we when recognize we are sitting on a mat, looking for a pool of Bethesda, rather than locking in to an "as soon as way of thinking", let us "stand up, take our mat and walk."