

(26.05.19 – St.Lawrence + Bedmond)

## **NOTHING'S IMPOSSIBLE**

Imagine what it must have been like. Thirty eight years sitting in virtually the same place, day after day, doing nothing except beg for money, getting more and more rooted to the spot, waiting with a mixture of disbelief and sheer frustration for a so-called angel to roughen up the surface of the pool close to where you're sitting and hoping to be the first one in to claim the miraculous healing everyone keeps talking about, only to find that it's always someone else who gets there first!

That's the picture we get from that story in John 5. And just to make matters worse, along comes this tourist who doesn't give him any money but actually says to him "Do you want to be made well?" I ask you! After thirty-eight years of all this, what would you think?

Of course, there's more than meets the eye here.

Have you ever wondered did he really sit there all day? And all night? Who fed him, if he couldn't get up and feed himself? Did people bring him there early in the morning, dump him at the side of the pool and then come back in the evening, after work, and pick him up along with whatever money he'd managed to get out of people passing by? Who would be passing by anyway? Wouldn't you find a different way in and out of work rather than keep going near a load of homeless street beggars each time? Unless, of course, you'd chosen that as your way of fulfilling the requirements of your religion to give help to the needy – especially if you could make sure lots of people saw you doling out some cash.

And what about that strange remark from Jesus when he came across him later. Not "Good to see you old chap. How are you doing?" No, it's "Don't sin any more or something worse might happen to you!" What was 'sinful' about being ill for thirty-eight years? Or perhaps he wasn't as ill as he was making himself out to be.

Some of you might remember that when we acted out this story in Miracle Man, twenty five years ago, that re-creation of the 'miracle' stories as though they were happening today, a very truculent Barbara Clifton took the part of the cripple sitting in a wheelchair outside the Barn, just behind the Henderson Hall. Her attitude towards the 'angel ruffling the water' was pretty straightforward.

"Here they are" she said, "sitting around like a lot of old loonies waiting for the water to start moving so that they can jump up and get in and then the first one in is cured! It never seems to cross their *something* minds that if they could get up and jump in, they wouldn't need curing, would they? I mean they'd have to be *something* cured to be able to get in, wouldn't they?"

Oh yes, as always, there's more than meets the eye here. Was that 'cripple at the pool' a seasoned con artist who knew how to get people to fork out money with a

minimum of effort on his part? Was he some sort of fake? (I speak as one who has watched, from some scaffolding at a building site in Cambridge, a man ‘blinded at Dunkirk’ chase off a man ‘crippled on the Normandy beaches’ very effectively, the pair of them suddenly able to overcome their apparent handicaps with surprising ease!) Still, whatever the story behind the story, it was an impossible situation he’d got himself into – until Jesus came along and demonstrated that nothing is ever impossible where God is involved.

And what about that Ezekiel story; what could be more impossible than trying to get a lot of old dry bones to get together and start walking and breathing like people with life in them! That’s a great story though isn’t it? Whatever else we might gain from coming to Church regularly, we certainly hear some amazing pieces of ancient literature – some of it very funny, some very moving, some full of inspiring visions, some with gory details which ‘some hearers might find upsetting’! That particular Ezekiel one was written about two thousand five hundred years ago. Our own earliest surviving English literature was the poem *Boewulf*, written about thirteen hundred years ago, so it’s amazing to be able to sit and listen to something written twelve hundred years earlier.

The setting for that ‘dry bones’ story was pretty well impossible to the Israelites of the time too. Practically the whole nation had been subjected to an early form of ‘ethnic cleansing’ a whole generation earlier.

Their Temple had been utterly destroyed, their capital city, Jerusalem, reduced to ruins and their people carted off into captivity in Babylon. Their entire religious system had virtually collapsed, and their national culture systematically subsumed into a foreign style of life totally anathema to the principles of Judaism. Every sensible, logical Jewish thinker and speaker knew that restoring Judaism to its previous state was, frankly, Mission Impossible.

“Not so” wrote the prophet Ezekiel. “Let me tell you a story about a valley of dry bones...”. And surprise, surprise, the ‘dry bones’ of Judaism did indeed have new life breathed into them. Jewish families were returned to their homeland, Jerusalem was rebuilt, the Temple restored, and the Jewish Law solemnly and inspirationally reinstated in the daily lives of its people and its ruling authority. Admittedly it was a whole generation after Ezekiel had presented his vision of new life being breathed into the dry bones of Judaism before it all came about – but it happened. The impossible became possible.

If there’s any message to be gleaned from these two apparently impossible stories, it’s this. No matter how impossible any situation might seem, once we get God involved, nothing is impossible after all.

Don’t mistake me though. I wouldn’t want you to think of me as a cockeyed optimist. I am, whatever else I may be, a realist. I do know that people whose legs have atrophied do not get up and walk. I am aware that dry bones with the flesh long since

become part of the surrounding environment do not reassemble themselves and recover themselves with soft tissue.

There is, however, a significant element in both those stories that might turn out to be a vital factor in making the impossible become possible. It's the human contribution.

Take the apparent miracle at the pool of Bethzatha. First, there's the human insight Jesus uses to grasp that this long-term illness is almost certainly more an illness of the mind than of the body. Nowadays we call it 'psycho-somatic disorder'. That's an amazing piece of on-the-spot medical diagnosis hundreds of years before that particular penny dropped in our culture.

Then there's the man himself. After all those years of whatever was going on in his life, he hears someone with authority telling him to pick up his bed and walk. And he does. Against all the sensible odds he actually does something that must have seemed impossible.

And what about Ezekiel. Living amongst all those disheartened Jewish exiles in Babylon he feels a strong sense of vocation to go and preach words of encouragement to those dry bones of Jewish despair and disbelief, hoping against all hope that a new spirit of life and vitality might be breathed into their barren minds. Everything in him tells him it's an impossible task, but he does it – and the dry bones come to life.

What I'm getting at is that perhaps after all it's not so much God's task to turn the impossible into the possible, but ours. Perhaps that's what being Christ's Body, his Church, is really all about.

Listen to how Mother Teresa put it in a prayer which has recently been brought to my attention:-

***I used to pray that God would feed the hungry or do this or that; but now I pray that he will guide me to do whatever I'm supposed to do. I used to pray for answers, but now I'm praying for strength. I used to believe that prayer changes things, but now I know that prayer changes us, and we change things.***

Yes, indeed; amen to that.

**Brian Hibberd**