

## **THE THIRD MIRACLE THAT JESUS DID (John 5:1-18)**

Today we return to our reflections on the Gospel according to John, having left off some months ago with the conclusion of chapter 4, “The Second Miracle that Jesus Did”, the healing of the nobleman’s son who was at the point of death. Chapter 5 begins with another miraculous healing. Jesus has returned from Galilee to Jerusalem for a Jewish festival (which?, we don’t know for sure), and by the pool of Bethesda, used among other things for the watering of sheep, he sees a large crowd of sick folk, the blind, the lame and the paralyzed, for the waters were known as having a healing effect when first they began to churn, presumable bringing salts and minerals from deep within the earth. Around the pool were five large colonnades, which St. Augustine took as symbolizing the Five Books of Moses, the Torah, the Law, which, he said, “bears the sick but does not heal them, discovers them but does not cure them.” This is an instance, such as one often finds in the ancient Church Fathers, where they read a good and valid truth *into* the text rather than *out of* it. That is not necessarily valid interpretation, but edifying, nonetheless.

It takes but little imagination for us to visualize the scene, the dirt and odor of the sheep market that was there, the despair written across the faces of the invalids, the stench of their wounds. In among the many dozens of the sick and maimed was a man who had been crippled for 38 years. Given the life expectancy of the times, he would have been an old man. Again, not to read something into the text that is not there, but it has often been noted that the Book of Deuteronomy (2:14) states that the years spent wandering in the wilderness by the children of Israel were “thirty and eight,” 38 years of *waiting . . . to enter . . .* the promised land. At any rate, we can imagine that there could hardly be a more helpless, hopeless case than that of this nameless man who had not the power to lift his lifeless limbs into the pool when, as was thought, an angel stirred the healing waters.

For reasons that are not stated, reasons hidden within the mystery of God’s will, Jesus singles out this man, and says, “Do you want to be healed?” Surely he did, more than anything else in life. Why else would he lie day after day, month after month, year after year, in this dreary place? So he explained the reason for his despair, the physical impossibility, and in

response Jesus said, “Stand up, take up your bed and walk.” Impossible, he must have thought. How do you stand when the muscles in your legs are like Jell-O and have been as long as you can remember? But suddenly they felt different. They felt like legs, with joints and muscles whole. So he stood, much to his own amazement, took up his bed and began to walk. This is the third miracle that Jesus did, restoring wholeness to limbs that had forgotten what they were for, giving life to the lifeless, hope to the despairing.

As quickly as Jesus had come upon the man, even so quickly did he walk away from him, losing himself amidst the crowd, whose attention he did not desire. The man too, his pallet in tow, walked away from that dingy place he had known for years. But the crowds were everywhere, the streets thronged with pilgrims for the feast. It is only at this point that we are told that it was the Sabbath. So many of Jesus’ acts of healing happened on the Sabbath that it is hard not to infer that this was by intention. Raymond Brown, the Roman Catholic scholar, wrote, “That Jesus violated the rules of the scribes for the observance of the Sabbath is one of the most certain of all historical facts about his ministry. From the Synoptic evidence it would seem that he deliberately worked miracles on the Sabbath as test cases providing an opportunity for him to proclaim his relationship with the Law.” Was this also why he commanded the man to take up his bed and walk, because he knew the scribes forbade this?

The scribes, or here it is simply said the Jews, spotted the man with his flimsy excuse for a bed and confronted him abruptly, “It is the Sabbath. You are not allowed to carry your bed on the Sabbath. It’s verboten.” How do we human beings, even quite religious and respectable human beings, sometimes *especially* religious and respectable human beings, manage to get things so wrong, to get our perspective so out of whack? Didn’t Jesus warn us about straining out gnats and swallowing camels? About trying to remove the splinter from our brother’s eye when we have a log in our own? It takes such exaggerated similes to adequately picture the blindness, the total lack of perspective or sensible values evident in a scene like this. They cared nothing for the man. They had no joy at his healing. Their only concern was their law, and that specific law about carrying a pallet was not really a law of Moses, but only a tradition, a requirement of the Mishnah. Sometimes we think that by carrying a principle to extremes we are exhibiting a greater virtue. Jeremy Taylor warned us against mistaking opinion, even historically venerable opinion, for dogma, or, he could have said, traditions (lower case ‘t’ as opposed to Holy Tradition) for divine ordinances.

“Who told you to take up your bed and walk?” They either knew the man or had heard of the healing, maybe both. “Who is the culprit behind this?” they demanded. I suspect that they knew. They were just trying to solidify their case. The cripple, however, did not know who it was. It had happened so quickly and Jesus had been swallowed up in the crowd. Jesus did find the man a little later in the temple, whether the man had gone, probably to give thanks to God for his healing or to certify it to the rabbinic authorities. “Now that you are healed,” Jesus warned him, “do not sin or something worse may befall you.” Once we are healed by God’s grace, once we are made whole in the waters of baptism, we must be careful, for we are still liable to falling away.

All of this then leads up to a confrontation between the Jews and Jesus, and this is the real focus of the story. Everything else leads up to this. It is noted that it was precisely such deeds done by Jesus on the Sabbath that stirred up their intense opposition. The teaching about the Sabbath was a fundamental commandment, of course, the foundations for which were laid in the opening chapter of Holy Scripture. The work of creation is described there as taking place in six days, whatever those days may have been, and God rested on the seventh day. Now God’s rest is not like ours, for he does not tire. His rest signifies rather that the work of creation itself was complete. The work of his governance and providence continued, of course, for without it all would go haywire, but the creation of the worlds and their creatures was finished. What was not complete, as the next few chapters of Genesis would make clear, was the work of redemption, the work that was foretold in the proto-evangelium of Genesis 3, the forewarning to the serpent of his defeat by the seed of the woman.

Some of the Fathers of the Church note interestingly that the heart of the work of our salvation took place on the sixth day of that week of weeks we call Holy Week, that day which by Jewish reckoning began at sundown on Maundy Thursday and lasted until Jesus was taken from the cross and buried before sundown on Good Friday. The next day, the seventh, the Sabbath, Jesus rested in the tomb, for his agonizing work, the baptism he had to undergo, the cup he had to drink, was, as he declared from the cross, “finished.”

In the larger biblical picture, the Sabbath rest still awaits us at the end of time with our entrance into the true Promised Land toward which the whole drama of redemption leads. In this regard we can begin to see the story of John 5 in a larger perspective, for the healing of the crippled man was a part of the redemptive work of the Messiah of which the prophets spoke. It

was the dawning of the Messianic Age, the coming of the kingdom of God, where the blind were made to see, the lame to walk and the dead are brought to life. The blind, the lame, the sick and the poor enter the kingdom of God, the last being made first, while the first, at least those who have neither eyes nor ears to perceive, are made last. Jesus' healing of the man by the pool of Bethesda is a part of his Messianic work of redemption, God's work of redemption. Hence he declared, "My Father is working still and I am working too."

"Blasphemy," screamed his opponents. "He is not only breaking the Sabbath, but making himself equal to God." Jesus was not breaking the Sabbath. He was making the true Sabbath. And he *was* equal with God. He was God, the eternal Word of God made flesh, come to reveal God's love, God's truth, God's grace and God's redemption. But his opponents were sure, dead certain, that they had it right, that this man, this threat to peace and order, must be stopped, and it is here stated clearly that now they fixed on their determination to kill him. He had come bringing life and wholeness, and they sought to put him to death. "In him was life, and the life was the light of men. And the light shineth in the darkness; and the darkness comprehended it not."

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