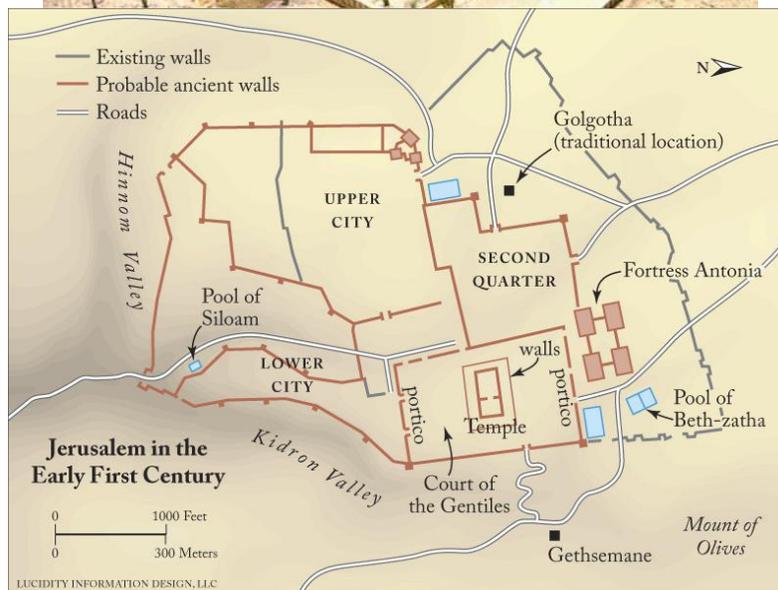
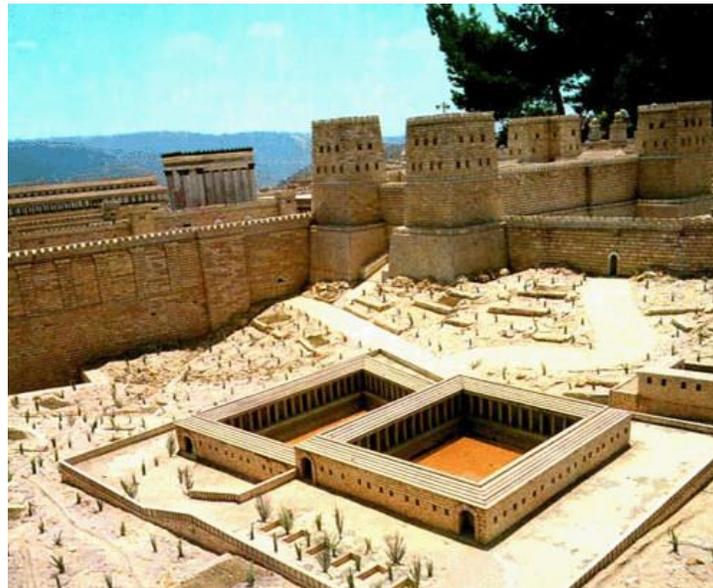


A reading from the holy gospel according to John.

There was a festival of the Jews, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. Now in Jerusalem by the Sheep Gate there is a pool, called in Hebrew Beth-zatha, which has five porticoes. In these lay many invalids—blind, lame, and paralysed. One man was there who had been ill for thirty-eight years. When Jesus saw him lying there and knew that he had been there a long time, he said to him, ‘Do you want to be made well?’ The sick man answered him, ‘Sir, I have no one to put me into the pool when the water is stirred up; and while I am making my way, someone else steps down ahead of me.’ Jesus said to him, ‘Stand up, take your mat and walk.’ At once the man was made well, and he took up his mat and began to walk. Now that day was a Sabbath. *Jn 5.1-9*



Above: a model of the Pool of Bethesda, outside the Temple, nr the Antonia Fortress
Below: a map showing the location

St George's Anglican Church Malvern

Sixth Sunday of Easter Yr C 5 May 2013

Acts 16.9-15 Psalm 67 Revelation 21. 10-14, 22 -25 John 5.1-9

We don't what Jewish feast Jesus was in Jerusalem to keep. Some experts think the year was 28AD and it was the Feast of Tabernacles. We don't know what the sick man was talking about when he said the water needed to be stirred up and he needed to be put in first if he was to be healed. That part of the story is no longer included in our translations because it is not a secure part of the original text. Sometimes the people copying the scrolls on which the scriptures were written would add comments and embellishments. There are scholars who spend their lives researching what is original and what has been added or expanded, and what to do about it. We should be grateful to them for doing that work.

We do know that later on, after the Romans destroyed the Temple and the city, these pools became a centre for the worship of Aesculapius, the god of healing

We do know here this event happened. Some experts think Jesus' mother lived near by that part of Jerusalem which might explain why he went to the pools at Beth-zatha. Some of us stood there recently. The pool is fed by a spring of water that rises further up the slope and was collected in two pools just outside the Temple in ancient Jerusalem. Water is scarce in the dry Judean hills where Jerusalem is built. Springs and wells are vital. But water was also needed in great amounts in Jesus time because anyone going to the Temple first had to wash in a ritual bath. There were hundreds of them – in homes and in public places. Maybe Jesus had gone there that day to wash before going on to the Temple.

Beth-zatha, Bethesda is now an archaeological dig dating to 1888. Today the pools are dry but two are clearly to be seen. The foundations of porticoes have been uncovered. They were four covered colonnades on the four sides of the pools, with a fifth down the middle dividing the area. John's gospel refers to five porticoes. It was also where sheep were washed for sacrifice. The gate in the city walls nearby was called The Sheep Gate, later there was a sheep market outside the walls. Today, all this area is just inside the Lion's Gate, near the beginning of the devotional walk Via Dolorosa.

Later an early church was built there and then replaced with the one there now. Today, one of the most beautiful churches in the holy land still stands there. It was built by the crusaders early in the twelfth century on a site traditionally associated with Anna and Joachim, Mary's parents. That's why it is thought Mary lived in that north east quarter of Jerusalem when Jesus was an adult. Today St Anne's is in the Muslim Quarter. It has beautiful acoustics and pilgrims usually sing there to enjoy the reverberations.

Well, all that sets the scene and says to us this story of the lame man who walked is a real story and it can become a story that is good news for us here, today. It is one of the third great sign in John's gospel that points to Jesus as the One in whom God is at work, doing only what can God can do.

The name of the place is Beth- Zatha or Beth- hesda; it means house of mercy or house of grace. For the man who has begged beside the pool for thirty eight years, that is exactly what the place became – a house of God's mercy. The story is told in such a way that the helplessness of the man contrasts with Jesus' initiative towards him.

The man expects that Jesus will lift him into the water but God's healing will come through the word of Jesus, not the water. Jesus' question to the man, 'Do you want to be made well?' begins an encounter that transforms the man's life. He could have refused. After all, he must have been accustomed to his disability and he had managed somehow all those years. Jesus may have been asking the man to weigh up the cost of change. Or, maybe the man had been longing for this day, never imagining it would come through a wandering rabbi with the accent of Galilee in his speech. Perhaps the man had faithful patience and at last god was acting for his good. In my experience, the very best of god's mercy and grace takes time to be ready for; and is well worth persistent patience.

There are people who say they long for something, but when it is on offer they do not, they cannot, choose it. This man needs to have the courage to imagine life beyond his paralysis if he is to receive God's mercy. He will live a different life, with new responsibilities if he responds to God in this critical moment. No one will give alms to a healthy man. How will he now live? Jesus tells the man to act as if he is already healed. 'Stand up, take your mat and walk', Jesus says. I don't believe Jesus bent over to assist. I think Jesus waited for the man to stand in response to Jesus' word to him. God does not do for us what we can do for ourselves. So, God makes it possible for us to go beyond what paralyses us and invites us to stand before Jesus, the one whom God sends to us, and to discover what God's grace accomplishes in our lives.

I said that this was the third sign in John's gospel that points to the truth about who Jesus is. Each of these signs presents Jesus as the giver of life.¹ In each sign, Jesus does what God does because Jesus and 'the father' are one. Jesus' habit of referring to God as his father is not because God is male, but because Jesus has no other better image to convey the unity of heart and purpose that he experiences with God. Another image that lies behind John's use of this one is the master and apprentice. The apprentice does only the work the master directs. All images have their limitations but John wants us to understand that in Jesus, God is at work to bring eternal life to the world, now and world without end.

¹ The seven signs in the Gospel of John refer to seven miracles reported in the first twelve chapters the gospel. The seven signs are:

1. Changing water into wine in John 2:1-11
2. Healing the royal official's son in Capernaum in John 4:46-54
3. Healing the paralytic at Bethesda in John 5:1-18
4. Feeding the 5000 in John 6:5-14
5. Jesus' walk on water in John 6:16-24
6. Healing the blind at birth in John 9:1-7
7. Raising of Lazarus in John 11:1-45

Now, that day was a Sabbath. Jesus had 'worked' on the day of rest. Jesus will defend his action as doing what God does. After all, if God withdrew from creation for a microsecond we would not exist. The day of rest was to be a sign that people lived within the covenant relationship with God; a bit like wearing your wedding ring shows that you live with in that relationship. Despite what his challengers said, Jesus was not 'breaking the Sabbath' but pointing to the life giving works of God that never cease. In the end, though, Jesus will pay a high cost for his participation in God's healing work when the life deniers get hold of him. But that is for another day.

Today, we see how a text from late in the first century (when John's gospel was written) comes to life when set within the context of the place where it happened. This sign is reliable – the archeology supports it; the text received in the community of faith supports it; and above all our own lives support it as we too give witness to Jesus, giver of life when we move beyond our paralysis, trust Jesus' word to us and stand and walk in the way he leads us.

Colleen O'Reilly