

May 26, 2002
Sunday of the Paralytic

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

Although our Lord cured a number of people from paralysis (cf. Mark 4:24; 8:6), the gospels narrate only two such instances in much detail: the paralytic lowered through the roof (Mark 2:1-12; Matthew 9:1-8; Luke 5:17-26), and the one lying at the pool of Bethesda (John 5:1-15). It also happens that these are the only two occasions of physical healing in which Jesus refers to the sins of the person whom he heals. Thus, He says to the man lowered through the roof, "Your sins are forgiven you," and after restoring the man at the pool of Bethesda the Lord exhorts him, "Sin no more"; (5:14).

Now it is worthy of remark that we find no references to personal sins in gospel stories about Jesus cleansing lepers, or restoring sight to the blind, or curing other sorts of ailments. He does not say to Peter's feverish mother-in-law, for example, "Your sins are forgiven you," nor does he exhort the man born blind, "Go, and sin no more." Indeed, in this latter instance the Lord specifically denies that the blind man was blind because of his personal sins (9:3). In short, only in those two instances of paralysis does Jesus refer to the sins of the one whom He cures, even addressing one of them with the exact words that He spoke to the woman caught in adultery: "Sin no more" (8:11).

One is disposed to wonder if there is some special reason why the restoration of the paralytics is alone distinguished in this way. Though the gospels do not address the question, one is prompted to inquire if there is not, in this kind of disability, some feature particularly symbolic of sin. Is there some aspect of paralysis itself that serves as an allegory of sin, something about this affliction that narrates the very properties of sin.

This question of allegory is especially urged in the case of the paralytic at the pool because of the recorded dialogue between this man and Jesus. The Lord's question, when He asks the paralytic, "Do you want to be healed?" is apparently elicited by the fact that the fellow has been lying in that place for thirty-eight years. It is because Jesus knows that "he already been in that condition a long time" that He makes the inquiry, "Do you want to be healed?" In other words, there is room for doubt about the man's genuine desire for healing.

Maybe his heart and soul have become as helpless and lethargic as his body.

Moreover, his response to our Lord's question is hardly reassuring. Instead of answering, like the blind men, "Yes, Lord" (Matthew 9:28), the paralytic immediately begins to make excuses: "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" (John 5:7). There is his answer. It is always somebody else's fault that he has not been cured, somebody else's advantage. He himself is not to blame, poor victim; he has been lying there at the pool of Bethesda for nearly four decades, using the same excuse to explain why, in a place of frequent healing, he has never been healed. Year after year he lies there. It gets easier all the time.

This seems to be the point, then, of the question that Jesus puts to the man: "Do you want to be healed?" Perhaps, in his deeper heart, he does not want to be healed, not really, and perhaps that is the sin to which Jesus is referring when He tells him, "See, you have been made well. Sin no more, lest a worse thing come upon you."

In removing his paralysis, the Lord also gives the man a straight command: "Rise, take up your bed and walk" (5:8). If this paralytic wants to walk in the way of the Lord, he must begin now. No more excuses. He must not lie around a minute longer, theorizing about the mysterious relationship between divine grace and human effort. This lethargic soul must not worry whether he may be slipping into semi-Pelagianism or whatever. He must get up on his feet, put his bed away, and walk.

Conversion is grace, to be sure, but it is also command. This wisdom is God's gift, but what is the first step we must take to attain it? Prompt obedience to a direct order: "Get wisdom! Get understanding!" (Proverbs 4:5) No more lying around, making excuses (usually about other people), no more theorizing about the mysterious quality of salvation. Just get up and get it!

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