

Now That Day Was a Sabbath (John 5: 1-18)

© Sarah Bachelard

It's a familiar kind of story, at least in gospel terms. Someone is sick; Jesus happens to be in the vicinity; and he effects the healing. In some of these stories, as in the one we just heard, the healing is connected at some level with forgiveness of sins; but sometimes it's not. In a huge number of cases, it all happens on the Sabbath – what is it with that? Did he stay indoors the other six days of the week? But of course, that's what gets him in trouble with the authorities. Which means that such stories often become the occasion for a commentary on the unbelief of the Pharisees or the crowd, for a parable or teaching. Like I said, it's a familiar kind of story, in gospel terms. But within this basic pattern, the gospel writers manage to convey a rich and subtle variety of theological meaning and spiritual teaching. And so it is with this story, from chapter 5 of the gospel according to John. So let's begin by taking a closer look.

Jesus has come back from his home region of Galilee in the north, to Jerusalem in Judea, for 'a festival'. We're not told which one. In the city, by the Sheep Gate, he goes to the place called Bethzatha – a place, by sounds of it, of extreme suffering. A mass of invalids sprawled out, blind, lame and paralyzed, all waiting for a miracle. Jesus' gaze falls on one of them: a man who had been ill for thirty-eight years, pretty much a life-time. 'When Jesus saw him lying there', says our text, 'and knew that he had been there a long time' – so this is no casual glance; it's moment of real seeing – 'he said him: "Do you want to be made well?"'

It seems a strange question. What d'you think? Why d'you think I'm here? Some commentators wonder if Jesus' searching look has discerned some ambivalence in this man, some less than whole-hearted desire for wellness and a different future. After all, people *can* get attached to the way things are, even when they're painful, less than optimal; we *can* begin to derive our identity from our misfortune. At some level, we don't really want things to change even though we continue to go through the motions as if we do. And there's a hint that Jesus may be onto something with this particular man when we hear his reply. He doesn't answer Jesus' question directly – he doesn't say, 'yes, I do want to be made well'. Instead, he gives a reason it hasn't happened: '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’.

It sounds like a real enough obstacle. Thirty-eight years of being alone, ‘of people taking advantage of him, pushing ahead of him, virtually ignoring him’.ⁱ It’s not his fault. But is there also an element of victimhood here, of crippling resignation? We can’t know, and it’s certainly not for us to judge, but it is interesting that Jesus’ next act is totally to by-pass what this long-suffering man had assumed was the condition of his becoming well. He doesn’t help him into the pool. He says simply, ‘Stand up’. You don’t have to wait. ‘Take up your mat’ – and I wonder what that signifies? Is his mat what made him comfortable, relatively speaking, with the status quo; a symbol of his resignation? Perhaps. Because, following Jesus words, says the text, ‘at once, the man was made well, and he took up his mat and began to walk’.

Now that day was, of course it was, a Sabbath. And here’s where it gets a bit comical. The Jews (and in John’s gospel, the phrase ‘the Jews’ refers always to ‘the religious authorities’ rather than to the people in general), they said to the man who had been cured, ‘It is the Sabbath; it is not lawful for you to carry your mat’. Thirty-eight years of paralysis and they’re worried about some mat-carrying?? The man who had been healed explained that he had just been made well and that the man who made him well had told him to pick up his mat and walk, but this did not seem to ameliorate the authorities’ concern. One scholar remarks that their picking up on the ‘surely minor mat-carrying’ feature of events rather than on ‘the major life-changing’ dimension of the healing, ‘demonstrates immediately the sickness of the current religious system and its distortion of values’.ⁱⁱ But perhaps we shouldn’t think too harshly of them. Religiously speaking, it’s often hard for us to see the wood for the trees.

In any case, all this precipitates a search for Jesus who has disappeared into the crowd. A bit later, Jesus meets up with the man again in the temple; he identifies Jesus to the authorities, who catch up with him and begin to persecute him for ‘doing such things on the sabbath’. And here’s where we get to the theological meat of the story. Jesus answers their complaints by saying: ‘My Father is still working, and I also am working’. This is a claim that has radical implications in at least two senses.

A striking feature of John's gospel is how many references there are to Jesus' 'works' or 'working'. It comes up far more often here than in any of the other gospels.ⁱⁱⁱ Part of the significance of this phrase for John is the sense that there's no distinction, no gap, between what Jesus does and what God is doing. Many times, Jesus speaks of 'the works I do in my Father's name', or of 'doing the works of the Father'. 'Very truly, I tell you', he says, 'the Son can do nothing on his own, but only what he sees the Father doing: for whatever the Father does, the Son does likewise' (5: 19).

The authorities immediately pick up on the implications of these words. If there's no gap between what Jesus does and what God is doing, if Jesus understands himself as wholly transparent to the work and will of God whom he calls his Father, then he is, as they say, 'making himself equal to God'. That's bad, that's blasphemous enough. But what's even more outrageous is that he's doing these works on the Sabbath. In their world, working on the Sabbath is itself the proof that what's being done cannot be from God. That's because in Genesis, God is said to have rested on the Sabbath, after creating everything. In Jewish law, 'the commandment which obliges people to rest on the Sabbath is a strict injunction to imitate God. [T]he person who doesn't rest on the Sabbath is a sinner, because he is neither obeying nor imitating God'.^{iv} So when Jesus responds to criticisms of him healing people on the Sabbath, by saying, 'My Father is still working, and I also am working', he's not only making himself equal to God; he's also deliberately denying that God is resting on the Sabbath. He's saying, in effect, the work of creation is still going on.

In other words, Jesus' consistent breaking of the Sabbath isn't just some random provocation, an attempt to shake up religious legalism, the authorities' obsession with rules at the expense of what really matters; it's a clear statement that creation is not just something that happened once upon a time, a long time ago. God is here and now at work in the world, generating and calling forth life. And Jesus is at the heart of it, involved in it. He's revealing the creative will of God as being towards life's wholeness and wellness, its fuller realisation. And he's working, as God, to release blockages where the flow of life is getting stuck. He's restoring people to community, overcoming enmity, healing the sick, renewing a sense of future. And the implications for us are clear. Following Jesus is about learning to participate with him in this work, to be drawn with him onto the inside of this continuing unfolding and realisation of creation itself.

But what does this mean in practice? Especially when we find ourselves in circumstances of what seem like intractable stuckness, unfulfilment and thwarting – situations of chronic illness or grief, persistent misunderstanding or dividedness, institutionalised racism or sexism, and incipient ecological collapse? And what does it mean to participate in the fulfilment of creation, when we feel powerless to effect the course of things in much of our own lives, let alone the life of the world?

Well, picking up on clues from our story, I wonder if it begins with being aware, attentive to where God's purposes in creation are not being fulfilled – think of Jesus' long, loving look at the man stranded by the pool. In our own lives, maybe this means taking a look at where and how we feel stuck, diminished – individually, corporately. Where are things stagnating? Where are we trapped in a futile pattern of complaint, or excuse making, or stress? If we were to take a long loving look at where creation is being thwarted in our community, here in Australia, I think it would mean really attending to the wound at the heart of our nation – the lack of full recognition and empowerment of the First Nations peoples of this land. More broadly, it would mean not turning our gaze from the suffering of the poor, or from any part of the creation that is violated and exploited.

And then, having faced where we're stuck, where life is being thwarted, diminished, it seems to me that joining with Christ means being open to possibilities and signs of newness – remembering they may come from unexpected quarters and by unanticipated means. It means being willing to play whatever part may be ours, perhaps giving up an old story or old habits, willing to let something go, holding open space, within and around us, receptive to grace. Above all, I think it means not resigning ourselves to less than *God* wills for the world, but persisting, as Jesus did, in giving of ourselves to liberate life for joy. And as this day is a Sabbath – well, what better day to begin and begin again?

ⁱ Frederick Dale Bruner, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2012), p.298.

ⁱⁱ Bruner, *The Gospel of John*, p.299.

ⁱⁱⁱ W.H. Vanstone, *The Stature of Waiting*, (Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse Publishing, 2006), p.24.

^{iv} James Alison, *Faith Beyond Resentment: Fragments Catholic and Gay* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 2001), p.9.