

When I trained to be a teacher at Exeter University, as well as Religious Studies, my second subject was History. I still remember a remark made by the lecturer in History. The National Lottery had recently been introduced and considering the chances of any individual winning the jackpot, he suggested that only idiots would waste their money in this way. In fact, he said, “John Major’s government was the first in history to tax idiocy!”

Well, whatever you think of the National Lottery, whatever the chances of winning a lot a money, the way it works certainly takes a realistic view of human behaviour. The idea of sudden enormous wealth for yourself without any work, saving or even long-term investment is obviously attractive. The natural world works to ensure the survival of the species into the next generation; fallen human nature, however, is far more bound to the self: our egotism starts with *me*; my own success, comfort and advantage and, perhaps, takes care of others as well, as long as they are a welcome part of my own world. In other words, no one plays the National Lottery hoping that someone else wins this week.

The same image of a lottery is reflected in today’s gospel, an image of fallen humanity. Think of all those maimed, disabled, crippled people, *all* hoping that the next time the waters are disturbed, *they* will be first into the pool: as they are carried or drag themselves forward at the right time, they soon forget about their fellow-sufferers and press on to be the first, the winner!

Like the majority of those around the sheep-pool in Jerusalem this morning - and doubtless, like those who gamble on the National Lottery, the paralysed man of today’s gospel seemed destined for disappointment. Indeed, the self-centred isolation of the egotist is bound to end in disappointment, unless like the legendary Narcissus you are so in love with of yourself that you fail to notice that you are alone.

It is a common error to imagine that life today is very complicated; that we who have been brought up in a scientific and technological age are far too sophisticated now to gain anything from studying the wisdom of a past age. And, for many, the idea that there is anything for us in these simple stories in the gospels, these healings and miracles, would sound absurd now. Yet it is this very simplicity, this directness of the sacred text that pushes aside all modern pride and talks to us at a far more fundamental level, uncovering the causes of human disappointment, our unease, that we all share, whether we are a success or not, whether healthy or unwell, whether well off or poor.

When Our Lord addresses the paralysed man for the first time his usual, his habitual disappointment is still there. As if the pallet, the bed upon on which he lies, represents his own personal misery. "*Sir, I have no man to put me into the pool when the water is troubled.*" After thirty-eight years you wonder at why he still bothers to come down to Bethesda!

But, it seems, his luck has changed! The solution to his predicament lies not in the five-porticoes of the sheep-pool but in Christ who stands before him. Our Lord does not analyse what has gone wrong; He is not interested in the causes of this man's particular condition: whether it be inherited, or accidental, psychological or self-inflicted. Christ merely asks him a simple question: "*Do you want to be healed?*" It seems to us so naive and obvious a question. Of course he does, doesn't he? Why else would he have been here all that time!

But the same question is addressed to you and to me, no matter what our condition. In other words, our hope of salvation, the answer to our human disappointment cannot be left to chance or the lottery of life; not even now to the paralysed man's religion, the Torah or the five books of Moses, represented by those five porticoes around the sheep-pool.

Instead, Christ gives the man four commands, four things to do. The first three are connected but simple: "*Rise, take up your pallet, and walk.*" This is addressed to us, of course. We are invited to see

our own condition in this paralysed man. We have to rise above our own egotism; take up our pallet, that is, the frame of our fallen nature, the old Adam, the weight of our own carnal selves; shoulder our burden and walk with it. As we were instructed, not long ago; remember? On the third Sunday of Great Lent: *deny yourself, take up your cross and follow me.*

If we are to be saved, we too have to take action, co-operate with grace. Our salvation is not automatic. And this concern cannot only be about ourselves - yes, it is true: even some people's search for salvation can remain egotistic. For there are still plenty of people, even among those who profess the faith of Christ, who give little thought or attention to their soul; happy, or rather comatose in the belief that they will muddle through and win in the end; who think, like Dickens character, Mr Mikawber, *something will turn up* and they will be saved. They won't be!

But there is one more instruction from Our Lord. You will recall what He tells the man when they meet later in the temple. "*See, you are well! Sin no more, that nothing worse befall you.*" What could be worse? The only thing worse than his paralysis will be to find himself on the road to hell. All sin is rooted in gratifying our own ego, enslavement to ourselves, not the service of God and one another. What an irony! That in our self-pursuit, our rush to be first, we stumble into being self-centred, the hell of isolation from the other.

No one, not even the best of us, can escape the analysis of the human condition, held up like a mirror in this simple, straightforward and uncomplicated gospel story. We cannot escape the ego. The simple purity, original innocence and immortality of the human soul created by God, is ever subject to the downward drag of selfishness in this world. Addressed as it was originally, to those who have newly found and come to Christ in baptism, the story of the paralysed man still speaks, nevertheless, to us who rejoice at this time in His resurrection. Rise, take up your pallet and walk. And, by the way, mind how you go, lest something worse befall you.