PRAYER OF THE DAY

Eternal God, it is your glory always to have mercy. Bring back all who have erred and strayed from your ways; lead them again to embrace in faith the truth of your Word and to hold it fast; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen

[Note from Pastor Fryer: I am going to read this story using the old King James Version. That is the translation I first read as a child. That is the version I always have in mind when I think of this story — this story I have always loved. Now, modern translations leave out verse 4 — the verse about an angel troubling the water and whoever stepped in was healed. If you look at modern Bibles, you will see that the number skips from verse 3 to verse 5. As a matter of what is called “textual criticism,” the modern translators are probably right. However, I continue with the old King James Version because verse 4 does no harm to the story. In fact, it makes the story more sensible. And I notice that ancient preachers like St. John Chrysostom took verse 4 for granted, as if it were part of their Bible. Anyway, here is the great, old story:]

HOLY GOSPEL ........................................................................................................... John 5:1-9a, KJV

1After this there was a feast of the Jews; and Jesus went up to Jerusalem.
2Now there is at Jerusalem by the sheep market a pool, which is called in the Hebrew tongue Bethesda, having five porches. 3In these lay a great multitude of impotent folk, of blind, halt, withered, waiting for the moving of the water. 4For an angel went down at a certain season into the pool, and troubled the water: whosoever then first after the troubling of the water stepped in was made whole of whatsoever disease he had. 5And a certain man was there, which had an infirmity thirty and eight years. 6When Jesus saw him lie, and knew that he had been now a long time in that case, he saith unto him, Wilt thou be made whole? 7The impotent man answered him, Sir, I have no man, when the water is troubled, to put me into the pool: but while I am coming, another steppeth down before me. 8Jesus saith unto him, Rise, take up thy bed, and walk. 9And immediately the man was made whole, and took up his bed, and walked...

HYMN 316  Jesus, The Very Thought Of You
In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

"The impotent man answered him, Sir, I have no man, when the water is troubled, to put me into the pool: but while I am coming, another steppeth down before me.

The man is alone. Maybe for the first years, friends and family waited with him. Their company would have been a comfort. Maybe they waited with him for a good long stretch of time. But mercy! Thirty-eight years have passed. By now, the man is alone, with none to help. He is alone, that is, until this good day. On this particular day, he finds Someone to help. Indeed, he finds the very Physician of body and soul to help him. This is a very good day for the man. It is a picture of a good day coming for you and me too. We might have been hoping and praying for a good long time. And we might be feeling awfully alone in this world. But a wonderful day is coming for each of you when your Saviour Jesus will come. And that will be a good day indeed!

Our text would have us know that Jesus was at this pool of Bethesda. But of course! Where else should we expect him to be? This simple idea is one the happiest things I can think of. Jesus is where the sick people are. Jesus is where he is needed. As he himself said,

They that are whole have no need of the physician, but they that are sick: (Mark 2:17 KJV)

Jesus is never off-duty. There is no segment of today or any day in which Jesus simply sleeps up there in heaven.

Jesus is where the sick, the blind, the halt, the withered are. He comes to Jerusalem, the capitol city, and he hastens to the Sheep Gate, for that is where he is needed. You and I live in a magnificent city. When visitors come to town, they come to see the fun and majestic sights. Likewise, Jesus could have headed to the museums and music halls and theatre of ancient Jerusalem. But those places not where we find him. I think we should take this story right into our hearts. If now, or someday, we should find ourselves alone and frightened in the hospital room, for example, let us know that we are not really alone, for Jesus loves to be there with us. When I bring the Holy Communion to sick folk, I am glad to do it because I figure that Jesus is already there, where he is needed, waiting for me to arrive so that in his name I can say, “This is my body, this is my blood, for you, for the forgiveness of sin.”

Back to the lonely invalid at the pool: One of the ancient preachers notes the patience of this man — patience amidst miserable circumstances.
Hear now what he says, and learn the greatness of his sufferings. For when Christ had said, “Wilt thou be made whole?” “Yea, Lord,” he saith, “but I have no man, when the water is troubled, to put me into the pool.” What can be more pitiable than these words? What more sad than these circumstances? Seest thou a heart crushed through long sickness? Seest thou all violence subdued? He uttered no blasphemous word, nor such as we hear the many use in reverses, he cursed not his day, he was not angry at the question, nor did he say, “Art Thou come to make a mock and a jest of us, that Thou asketh whether I desire to be made whole?” but replied gently, and with great mildness, “Yea, Lord”; yet he knew not who it was that asked him, nor that He would heal him, but still he mildly relates all the circumstances and asks nothing further...

(Chrysostom, Homilies on St. John, Homily XXXVI)

Thirty-eight years is a long time to wait. It is a long time to keep up hope. It is a long time to ward off bitterness of spirit.

And yet, it is not unheard of for us human beings to go so long without a solution. Some people, for example, are born into a poverty that they might never escape. The forces are just too much against them. Imagine that you are born into an economy where your likely job is to be a coal miner. Each morning you leave the sunshine behind and climb down into the darkness. At one time, you might have been young and strong. But such a life of work takes a toll on a person and ages you. Thirty-eight years might pass down in the coal tunnels. If it were not for Jesus, the coal miner might have the satisfaction of knowing that he is doing the best he can, but there will be little else to hope for. And yet, because of Jesus, the coal miner can hope for eternity in the New Jerusalem. He can hope for that great city where he walks on streets of pure gold in the midst of light that never turns to darkness. And because Jesus loves to be where he is needed, the coal miner can know that Jesus is with him down there in the coal shaft. He can live for Christ below the ground. He can conduct himself as a Christian down in the darkness, knowing that Jesus sees his good life and gives him credit for it. He can persevere in hope, as the man at the pool persevered. He can wait on the Lord, knowing that one day, he will see better times.

There are Christian children over in Africa who are realistic about their chances. They know that they are not likely to become rich. They know that the medical care in their village, even in distant cities, is pretty primitive compared to that in much of the world. They know that they might live their next thirty-eight years and never really know the prosperity that many of us take for granted. But also, they know Jesus. They know that Jesus was a poor man with nowhere to lay his head (Matthew 8:20). Foxes have their holes and birds of the air have their nests, but Jesus had no place where he could open
the door and know that he was home. Jesus knows the way of life of many poor people in this world. And he loves to be with them, to study their circumstances, to understand how great it is that they accomplish what they do, to admire their virtue and Christian character, to resolve to listen carefully to the prayers of the poor, to answer them according to his wisdom, and to prepare heaven for them. It is possible to go thirty-eight years without yielding to bitterness of spirit, but rather to walk with Jesus and to wait on Him.

Disabilities and old age can come upon us so hard that we know that unless Jesus helps, there is none to help. If we are old, we might not have thirty-eight years left to us, and yet because Jesus knows us and loves us even in our dwindling years, we have more than thirty-eight years ahead of us. Why, we have much more than that, even eternity! And we have Jesus in churches like this one to meet with us week-by-week to promise us the forgiveness of our sins, resurrection of the body, and life everlasting.

Once upon a time some righteous folk criticized Jesus for receiving tax collectors and sinners and eating with them. Jesus answered them with his beautiful parable of the one lost sheep:

4What man of you, having an hundred sheep, if he lose one of them, doth not leave the ninety and nine in the wilderness, and go after that which is lost, until he find it?
5And when he hath found it, he layeth it on his shoulders, rejoicing. (Luke 15:4-5, KJV)

Then Jesus pinned down the heavenly meaning of his parable:

7I say unto you, that likewise joy shall be in heaven over one sinner that repenteth, more than over ninety and nine just persons, which need no repentance. (Luke 15:7, KJV)

This is the nature of Jesus. This is the character of our Lord. He wanders out into the highways and the byways, seeking sinners he can lead home. He lingers in hospital rooms and the huts of poor people. He hastens off to the pool of Bethesda, because that is where he is needed. His heart is always with the needy. And this is good news because you and I need him! And to him be the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.