

*Down by the river*

There is a theme that connects our readings this morning and it's a beautiful example of how strands and images that run through the Bible give it a coherence and unity in the midst of much diversity. And what links our passages this morning is the image of water and of people gathered by it. Yes, a river runs through these readings and we are given an invitation to stop at three places where that river passes and to consider what is revealed about our world and about God and about ourselves.

So first stop is John chapter 5 where we find ourselves in Jerusalem by a pool known as Bethesda and there we find a picture of deep human need. We're told that this pool has 5 colonnades and 'in these lay many invalids - blind, lame and paralysed'. What a distressing place this is, a painful place where our ears are assailed by the sound of groans and the cries of beggars. Among them lies this man who has been paralysed for 38 years and his situation is tragic. It seems that the pool has healing properties when every so often the water is stirred up – but this man never makes it in because someone else always get in ahead of him. This is our push and shove world, the world of sharp elbows where there is a hierarchy of helplessness even among the sick and the marginalised. And those 5 colonnades are always full of human detritus. Even when some are healed they are always replaced by others for the world has a way of restocking the supply of the suffering. And what we witness by this pool is our familiar world where needy and desperate people fight over limited resources because some always have power and advantage over others. What we have here is a little cameo of our world, with all our suffering and inequalities deposited by this pool, this desperate and distressing place.

Except, of course, that Jesus is to be found there and this therefore is no godforsaken place. Here is depicted God's coming among us in Jesus, coming among us full of grace and truth and compassion. And because God is present there in Jesus it means that we can move to another, altogether more hopeful scene which we find in our reading from the Book of Revelation. Once again we are in a city and once again we are by the water's edge. This time, however, we are beside 'the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb and down through the middle of the street of the city.' And here as we sit by the water's edge we witness total

transformation. Because God came in Jesus, there are here no sick, no lame, no paralysed, no poor, no starving, no war-wounded, no bereaved, no refugees, no Pool of Bethzatha. Here on either side of the river there stands the tree of life with leaves for the healing of the nations and here everything cursed has been banished for ever. And what a scene this is! What a river in which to bathe our feet. What a vision in which to bathe our eyes.

So our readings this morning are bookended by these two images: a pool, a place of deep distress and longing; and a river of healing and restoration where all is at peace. The problem, however, is that they seem so far apart. There is such a long distance between the two. The river flows from one Jerusalem to the other, from that corner of the earthly city of Jerusalem with its suffering humanity to the spacious new Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God. But it's a long, long river and we seem to be stuck at the painful pool of Bethzatha with the glorious new Jerusalem out of sight. But what is crucial, however, is that between these two scenes there is a third that we find in our reading from the Book of Acts . Here again, in Acts 16, we come upon a scene by a river, this time where a group of women are at prayer. So we need to pause here, and to sit by this water's edge, and ponder what happens.

Well, what happens here is that the apostle Paul and his companions are travelling through the ancient world preaching the Gospel of the risen Christ and raising up churches, outposts of Christ's kingdom. And we are told that they have been explicitly prevented by the Spirit of God from going in two directions: south west to evangelise Asia, and north to Bithynia. Instead they are directed to the West by a strange vision in the night of a man from Macedonia appealing to them, 'Come over and help us.' And as a result of this Paul finds himself diverted to the city of Philippi, where he heads down to the river to where this group of women are praying. And as we watch our focus rests upon a woman called Lydia, a dealer in purple fabric. And she is an interesting person – she's a woman, but a woman of wealth as she deals in purple and purple fabric was extremely expensive and prized in the ancient world. She was not a Jew but what was known as a godfearer, someone attracted to Judaism and the God of Israel while remaining a Gentile . And she worships with other women outside the city, down by the river - there was apparently no synagogues in Philippi so the sisters were doing it for themselves. And Paul and his companions find them and Paul preaches and Lydia becomes a believer and is baptised with all her household. And see how

God uses her: Lydia opens her home in hospitality and with her generosity and her wealth and her entrepreneurial skills the nucleus of a church is established there. But note here what is happening: the Gospel is being directed to Europe. Here in this scene is the source of European Christianity. And if you were to draw up a family tree of our congregation here this morning and trace its origins then somewhere back there Lydia and her church would feature. Indeed you could say that all the glories of Christendom from the Sistine Chapel to the great cathedrals of Europe owe their very existence to this vision of a man calling for help and this woman who responded to the Gospel and opened her home.

Now, there are two lessons we learn from all this. The first is that what we witness taking place outside the city gate of Philippi is profoundly related to our other two readings. Between the Pool of Bethesda of the old Jerusalem with its pain and suffering, and the river of life in the new Jerusalem with its healing and consummation, there is this little group of people assembling by the river and becoming church. And they are a vital part of God's strategy for bringing healing and salvation to the world and linking those two Jerusalems. Let me put it this way. It has been pointed out that this whole area round and about Philippi where these women gathered was very much associated with one man and that man was called Alexander the Great. Alexander was the King of Macedonia and a man whose vast conquests completely changed the face of the ancient world. Many of the place names that we encounter here in Acts 16 – Troas, Philippi – were named after Alexander and his family. The entire region was saturated with memories of Alexander, and Alexander's aim was to unite the known world under his rule, his conquests. Now, it has been suggested, intriguingly, that Paul's vision of a man from Macedonia reminded him of Alexander and it inspired in him a desire to unite the world under a different ruler, under the rule of Christ. It inspired him to over-ride Alexander's conquest with a conquest of a different kind. And how does that conquest take place? Well, we see it described in our passage. People come to faith in Jesus, people worship, people learn to share. And that means that in the crazy, upside down economy of Jesus' realm what is happening here by the river among a group of women outside the city is every bit as significant as the conquests of Alexander the Great. The formation of believing, worshipping communities is a crucial part of God's strategy that leads from the pain and tragedy of the old Jerusalem to the healing and restoration of the new. The creation of these

Christly gatherings is part of the politics of God's rule over the world and every bit as significant as all the great powers and empires that strut the globe.

Then there's another lesson to be learnt from all this. Our passage from Acts reminds us not only that God has a strategy for saving the world but also that at different times God has different priorities for the Church and the Gospel. Back here in our reading Paul was diverted away from Asia and into Europe. Then it was Europe's and not Asia's time. Entire geographical regions were put on hold while others were prioritised. And now we could say in our own day that for the time being at least it is no longer Europe's time. We have had our season with the Gospel and it seems now that the Spirit of Jesus is at work elsewhere – in Asia, in Africa, in China, in South America. At last there is a non-European pope, demonstrating the shift in the centre of gravity of the world-wide church. And elsewhere the river of the Spirit is in spate and bursting its banks while here it is running dry. And maybe we must now see ourselves in the man from Macedonia calling out to the world-wide church to come over and help us! And maybe the Church of Scotland of which we are a part and which has been meeting in Assembly this past week in Edinburgh, and wrestling with decline, needs to recognise that it's future wellbeing may be dependent on those from other parts of the world where the faith is flourishing. And that may be our future here – this church – and thank God that we are blessed with so many people from other places where the Spirit is at work.

Such is God's strategy. Such is God's sovereign directing of that river that runs from the Pool of Bethzatha to the new Jerusalem. And we see ourselves with Lydia and the women in their gathering, because that river that runs through Scripture and through the world runs through the city of Amsterdam. And here we at the English Reformed Church sit by the water's edge. Here we gather and pray and worship like those women and we learn to share. And we long for the day when the Amstel and the canals will become the River of Life, sparkling like crystal and flowing down the middle of the street of the new Jerusalem. Amen.

O holy and gracious God,  
living, flowing source of life,  
we praise and we bless and we honour you,  
    hands open in praise,  
    hearts open in love,  
    spirits open to your Spirit.

We gather here to praise and to pray  
and to listen for your Word to us.  
For you have brought us here,  
drawn us and directed us,  
that this might be a place of meeting between us and you –  
a place of worship, a place of blessing;  
you have brought us here,  
pulling at our hearts,  
that this might be a place of witness to your grace.  
Forgive us, we pray,  
that we have resisted the promptings of your Spirit;  
forgive us, we pray, for our failure to be faithful.  
Hear us as we confess our sin and guilt,  
And acknowledge our failures.

O God, speak to us words of reassurance  
that in Christ we have been forgiven and cleansed.  
Bathe us in the life-giving streams  
of your love and refresh us:  
we pray in the name of Jesus, our Lord and Saviour,,  
and in whose words we pray together, saying....