



Sermon preached by Revd Nigel Uden on 22nd May 2022
Readings: Psalm 67; Acts 16.9-15; John 5.1-9

Today's Gospel reading paints an emotive picture. There's an *ancient pool*, of striking architecture, including those five porticoes, or porches. It seems the pool's waters had curative powers for the first person who can get into them once they have been stirred up. There's a *large group of people with disabilities*, sheltering under the porches, who will themselves have been a striking image – ill ones, blind ones, lame ones, and people so diminished by their condition that the Bible's word is about 'wasting away'.¹ And it's all in the context of some sort of *religious festival* - we don't know which festival it was, but it may be the event that attracted Jesus to Jerusalem on that day.

Getting alongside the disabled people, Jesus singles out one who appeared to be utterly friendless; 'I have no one to put me into the pool'. Perhaps that's the worst, hardest to bear impairment of all. Jesus then urges this one who was *lying down to stand up*. It seems it was about rather more than a change of stance. You see, the word translated by our Bibles as 'stand' is richer than describing a mere posture. At various points in the New Testament, this Greek verb² is used for things like 'waking or getting up',³ 'restoring to health',⁴ and 'rousing to war'.⁵ Likewise, as a noun it can also mean 'resuscitation' and even 'resurrection'.⁶

All this helps us to understand the significance of what Jesus achieves for the man who has apparently been helpless and friendless for 38 years. There's *restoration to health* after four decades struggle. There's *arousal to action* after a lifetime of limitation. There's *waking up to a new life*, full of hope, after an eternity of nightmares. There's the *care of a stranger* so that for once he knew he mattered. And might there also be a *spiritual awakening*? The man realises that Jesus has done for him something that no one else has ever been able, or even *wanted*, to do. In that word, 'stand', the man is healed; and in carrying the bed he responds by taking control of what had for so long controlled him. If 'stand' is Jesus's healing of him, might 'walk' be the man's adoption of active faith?

So, maybe just as Jesus does, we can use this entirely ordinary word, 'stand', to speak of various aspects of the Christian life.

First, stand *up* and worship. Remember St Basil⁷ – teaching us to stand for worship as a reminder to imitate the posture of the risen Jesus; and of the dynamic onwards journey of discipleship to which Jesus calls us. Then there's King Solomon, dedicating the temple he'd had built, praying as all the people stood.⁸ And what about Jesus? In the Sermon on the Mount, tradition has it that he was sitting as the people stood to listen and learn.⁹ So it is that we stand up every time the Bible is brought into the Sanctuary, or a hymn is announced. (Though if we were at Cambridge's German Lutheran Church, we might sit for the hymns and stand up for the prayers.) Whenever we do it, our standing signifies that we're impressed by God, God as we see God in Jesus; impressed by ideas

¹ ξηρὸν from ξηρὸς – dry, withered

² derived from ἐγείρω - to excite, arouse, awaken; to raise from the dead; to rise up from a recumbent posture; to restore to health; to excite to war; to cause to arise, exist or appear; resurrection, resuscitation

³ Matthew 2.13, 20, 21

⁴ James 5.5

⁵ Matthew 24.7

⁶ Matthew 27.52 and 53

⁷ Basil the Great 330-379 *Canon XCI* Available at

http://www.holytrinitymission.org/books/english/canons_fathers_rudder.htm#_Toc78634056; accessed 21st May 2022

⁸ II Chronicles 6.3

⁹ Matthew 5.1

such as Jesus being ‘the gift of God’s very self to the world’.¹⁰ That phrase is from the questions asked to a minister at ordination and induction, and every time I have addressed it to ministers when presiding at such occasions, it has moved me to my core. ‘Do you believe that Jesus is the gift of God’s very self to the world?’ In his presence, of course we’d get to our feet! True, we are all at different points in that thinking. This man beside the pool does not seem to have been in any way pious or religious. Indeed, it isn’t he who approaches Jesus; it’s the other way round. But there follows this defining encounter at the water’s edge. And note, he doesn’t have to enter the water; he simply says that he’s never been able to get into it for healing; someone else has pipped him to the pool. And here’s the point: even that supremely understated, one might day unintentional interest in Jesus leads to his life being changed – physically and spiritually, he stood up. Even though we would each tell our spiritual story differently, a sense of who Jesus is and why Jesus matters, leads us to worship him. As we sang a few moments ago, *we* ‘stand up and bless the Lord [our] God.’

Secondly, stand *firm* in faith. These are not easy days for the church in these islands, in Western Europe or North America. The tendency to devout agnosticism is as influential, and, it seems, infectious as ever. How do we stand firm as people of faith, not dogmatic in our claims but determined in our proclamation of good news? I enjoy jigsaws. The sense that no piece is ‘entire unto itself’ is equally as true of the church as it is of jigsaws. Some of you will have heard me say before that one of the chief reasons I belong to the Church is that I need you as my partners on the Christian Way; I struggle to stand firm on my own. It’s not to do with my ability – though that is unexceptional. No, it’s about strength, resilience, and faith. When I explore the Book of Reports to the Annual Church Meeting that will be held after this service, I am grateful for the range of other people’s experiences and talents, of convictions and enthusiasms upon which each of us can rely, to complement our own. It is only *in partnership with each other* that most of us can stand firm in witnessing to Christ, in the centre of Cambridge at a time when to do so is as of importance as ever.

Thirdly, stand *together* with those in need. Solidarity is key to human society’s thriving – the imperative to stand together. We heard a moment ago of how the plea for help from a person in Macedonia stirred Paul and his companions immediately to set sail to respond to them. It’s noteworthy, we might say salutary, that to get to Macedonia they crossed ethnic boundaries into Europe; they were not only helping their own. Some of you may have heard Radio 4’s *Any Questions* on Friday, when a person told of their utilities bill – more than £500 a month - and asked which of their disabled daughter’s equipment they should switch off as the cash ran out. Lord Blunkett asked ‘how the hell he could answer the question’, and another of the panel wondered ‘who is taking the mickey here?’ How, indeed, do we help in such circumstances? As Christian Aid Week for 2022 ends, I am struck that one of the straplines boldly displayed at the service last Sunday evening in Cottenham Parish Church was ‘*Stand Together , for dignity, for equality, for justice.*’ Whatever doctrine we may or may not feel able to stand up for, standing together with people in need is fundamental to authentic Christian living – we cannot say we’ll *stand up* for God whom we have not seen, if we do not *stand with* our neighbour whom we have.

And **finally**, stand *for* something. An American advertising executive once said, ‘If you stand for something, you will always find some people for you and some people against you. If you stand for *nothing*, you will find nobody against you, and nobody for you.’¹¹ There are as many issues filling today’s news as in days gone by. Whilst it is easy for us to sit on the fence, too often that’s a denial of the justice and peace to which the prophets of old continue to call us. As Church Members, we will not agree on every public issue. When today’s Church Meeting considers how to respond to proposals for refugees to be sent to Rwanda, for me the defining question is ‘what will we stand for?’ Is Sir John Major right to say that implementing the proposal would be a stain upon our country’s reputation’,¹² or do we stand for something else? When I stand for something I might

¹⁰ United Reformed Church, *Affirmations at Ministers’ Ordination*, Schedule C, 9 question form, Question 3

¹¹ William Bernabach 1911-82

¹² Sir John Major in a speech to the National Cathedrals Conference, Newcastle Cathedral, 16th May 2022

sometimes get it wrong; believe me, I know that because I have got it wrong too many times before. But my own sense is that to stand for *nothing* is to risk being good for nothing. Nor is standing for nothing an adequate standing up for Jesus and his righteousness, for as I see it, the one standing up for Jesus will be ready to risk being wrong in dogged pursuit of being right, as we strive for God's kingdom and his righteousness.¹³

Jesus said, 'Stand.'

Stand up, stand firm, stand together, stand for.

May the power of the risen Christ give us all that we need to do so.

And to God be the glory. Amen

N. P. Uden

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