

10.00am Healing Eucharist – 9th May 2010
Easter 6 – Year C

Acts 16: 9-15
Rev 21: 10, 22 – 22:5
John 5: 1-9

As you probably know, there are dozens of light-bulb jokes. The original was probably how many idiots does it take to change a light bulb ? Answer: 100. One to hold the bulb and 99 to turn the ceiling.

My favourite, however, is: How many psychotherapists does it take to change a light bulb ? Answer: only one, but the light bulb must really want to change.

Many people go to healers, counsellors or helpers, asking them to change the circumstances in which they have to live. And the wise healer will gradually bring them to understand, that the problem's often in themselves. Things will only get better if they're willing to make changes in themselves. Alcoholics Anonymous, for example, include this as one of their 12 steps to healing. You can break the habit of drink, but only if you really want to change. If simply changing the surroundings solved problems, Adam would have stopped sinning once he left paradise. In one way or another, most of us are sick, in mind, or body, or just sick of the circumstances we live in.

Just as he asked the man by the Pool of Bethesda, Jesus asks us: **Do you want to be made well ? And, are you prepared to face the required changes ?** Nobody likes change. I don't like change, ask Kathy. The older we get, the less we want to change our ingrained habits. But if you're thinking that you can't teach an old dog new tricks, remember that Abraham was over seventy when God told him to leave his home, go to a new country and found a new nation. Refusal to change can result in slow death.

If you plough the same furrow year after year, the furrow becomes a rut and you're stuck in it. Which reminds me that today is Rogation Sunday, when the church has traditionally offered prayers for God's blessing on the fruits of the earth and the labours of mankind. Ancient pagan observances included processions through the cornfields to pray for the preservation of the crops from mildew. And the Christian honouring of Rogation Day has varied over the centuries. Elizabeth I ordered the "**perambulation of the parish**" at Rogationtide, a custom still observed in many places. Rogation Sunday was a time to "**beat the bounds.**" To walk around the boundary of the parish. To be certain you knew just where those boundaries were, and who was inside them, and who was outside them.

Now, healthy boundaries are a good thing. They help us live more fulfilling lives, respecting others and respecting ourselves. But sometimes we have to push at the boundaries. In our Gospel reading, we heard about the healing at the Pool of Bethesda. And the final sentence was – **Now that day was a sabbath.**

Jesus certainly was pushing at the boundaries that existed in his own time, as healing was considered to be work, and work was forbidden on the Sabbath for a good Jew. When Paul and Silas went to Philippi, in Macedonia, they pushed at the boundaries of how far to travel in order to proclaim the Gospel. When they first arrived at Philippi, they were surprised to find that there was no synagogue. The only place the handful of Jews could find to worship was on the river bank, '**where . . . there was a place of prayer**'. Their faith had made them push the boundaries. Many people would have said: '**We don't have a synagogue building, or a church building in our case, so we can't hold services.**' But the Jews of Philippi knew that you can pray anywhere, even on the river bank.

Among them was a woman who was not a Jew. Lydia was a merchant, dealing in purple cloth. This was a luxury commodity, the purple dye being made from scarce murex shells. And the cloth was only worn by very rich people, or members of the Emperor's household. She was possibly a widow, and had taken over from her late lamented husband, a thriving international trading company. She came from Thyatira, where there was a guild of purple-dyers. But though she was a Greek, she had no time for the superstition of the pagan temples. She wanted to find a real god, who would answer her prayers and insist on fair dealing between his people, as she did in her business. So she joined the Jews, at the place of prayer on the river bank, and became, not a convert, but a worshipper of God. Here she listened to Paul, and found that the Christian religion was the answer to her prayers. Soon after, Paul baptized her, there in the river, together with all the people who worked for her, and she invited Paul, and his companions to sleep in her home-cum-business premises. So Paul's prayers, too, had been answered. He'd made his first European converts, and from this tiny acorn, a mighty oak would grow.

Everywhere can be a place of prayer. We thank God for beautiful churches, such as our own, with their special feeling of holiness, where we can pray with the encouragement of fellow Christians beside us. But we can also pray beneath the open sky. Jesus said: '**For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am**

there among them.' And we can pray in the privacy of our bedroom. Jesus also said: **'Whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.'**

Do we take the time to talk AND listen to God through regular prayer and silent, Holy listening ? If and when we sense that God is leading us in a certain direction, do we test out that direction ? Seeking affirmation from church, family, friends and other trusted sources ? If it does indeed seem to be God's gentle hand acting in our lives, and our discernment is affirmed, are we bold enough to act, or do we let fear, complacency, routine, or something else stand in the way ?

The gospel is unchanging. But the world is changing all the time, and we have to find new ways of sharing God's love with the people of today. The Church in this country is not fighting fit, fewer people go to church on a regular basis. Eventually it will die, unless we attract new members. To do that, we must share with others the gospel that God loves them, and let them experience God's love in our fellowship.

In today's rapidly changing social context, and in a society that is increasingly spiritual and decreasingly religious, searching out new ways to proclaim the Good News of Jesus Christ beyond our church buildings is mandatory. And in doing this, we will find the fire of our own faith rekindled. Jesus asked the paralysed man, **Do you really want to be healed ?** He asks the same question of the Church today. Of me and of you. And if our answer is yes, we have to accept the challenge of change, and then stand up and walk.

Amen.