



Sermon: - 1st May 2016

Do you want to be well?

I recently watched a Derren Brown programme on TV. Brown is a magician, but his tricks rely more obviously on unconscious persuasion than other magicians and lately he has taken to making programmes which seem to specialise in looking at human behaviour and how it can be manipulated. The particular programme I watched was this one, Derren Brown: Apocalypse.

The trailer reads like this: Apocalypse unleashes Derren Brown's most audacious plan yet – to convince one person that the planet has been devastated by a catastrophic meteor strike, that lethally infected people now roam the land and he is one of a handful of survivors. The young man's family had appealed to Derren Brown because they were of the opinion that this young man took life for granted and didn't truly value what he had. The plan is that the situation he believes he faces will give him a wake-up call and teach him valuable life lessons.

Now you could say that this guy had agreed to the experiment because he had applied to be on the show, but he thought he had failed the audition and it was only after some time had elapsed that Derren began the mind games. In the end the exercise had the desired result, and the man turned his life around, but this was, in a sense, a non-consensual healing – it was the man's family who thought he ought to change, not him, not, at least, at that point.

Contrast that life changing event with the life changing event we read about this morning. When I read this passage, one sentence leapt out at me, when Jesus asks the man by the pool, "Do you want to be made well?" It got me thinking and so I looked at the healing miracles of Jesus and there are a couple of strange things about this particular story. Firstly, Jesus apparently approaches the man by the pool, rather than wait for the man to attract his attention. Well, that's unusual. Jesus usually has to avoid people and is not in the habit of offering healing. We have to make the first move; we have to show initiative and demonstrate that we are positively motivated. In every other healing miracle we are told about, the sick person approaches Jesus. But then Jesus goes on to ask a question, one that Derren Brown didn't bother to ask his subject, Jesus asks, "Do you want to be made well?" Perhaps if Derren Brown had asked that young man that same question he would have got the answer "no, I'm fine". But for Jesus to ask it of this guy who had lain by the pool for 38 years, seems really strange. Why would he not want to be well?

If you were he, would you not want to be well? And yet this question gets to the heart of the psychology of coping with illness. Because there is an extent to which discomfort is comfortable, it is known, it is safe, it is unsurprising and predictable.

Being a victim, in the sense of suffering through no fault of your own, can be an unthreatening and secure place to be. Because it's not our fault, someone else is to blame and so we don't need to take responsibility.

And also, there is something in our psyche which quite enjoys negativity. There's a Victor Meldrew inside all of us. It's often easier to moan than to rejoice, easier to frown than to smile. It might take fewer muscles to smile, but when you frown, gravity is on your side! The power of negative thinking is that it seduces us with its comfortable face and the sense of camaraderie. Smile and the world smiles with you. Cry and you cry alone? I'm not sure! We all love a good moan. It arouses kindred feelings. And sometimes, when things are going wrong, we prefer to moan and complain rather than to take the sometimes difficult path of trying to put things right. It's always easier to blame someone else.

Being well, on the other hand, can be uncomfortable. Being whole brings responsibilities. This man had spent all these years by the pool, and presumably others were feeding and clothing him. Once healed he would have to do it for himself. No more pity, no more help, only standing on his own two feet, providing for himself, and taking responsibility.

Do you want to be well? Do you want to think positively? Do you want to rejoice? Well, maybe, let me think about it. What would I have to give up?

My gripes and moans, my feelings of being hard done to, my lack of responsibility.

I would have to DO something if I was well. I couldn't lie here in leisure and feel sorry for myself.

Do you want to be well? It's a challenge. To say "yes" I want to be well" I want to be set free from my negative thinking. I want to be positive rather than negative. I want to grow, and change, and develop.

It seems to me that negativity is the default position of people in groups. Listen in to any conversation and sooner or later people will start to complain. The weather, the bankers, the politicians, the bosses ... the Presbytery, 121 George St ... But what if we were to think positively instead?

I have a friend who works in Glasgow, but every Friday she has to travel through to her company headquarters in Edinburgh for the weekly pep talk. The problem is that the boss's idea of a pep talk is to tell them all how badly they are doing and how they need to sharpen up their practice. After the meeting she travels home with a friend and they spend the journey complaining about the boss. Not surprising. However, Jill, my friend, realised that what was happening was that she was starting every weekend in a bad mood and that her Friday experience clouded the whole weekend. So she decided to change her attitude. The following Friday on the journey home her friend tried every conversational gambit she could think of to draw Jill into their customary moan fest. Finally giving up she turned to Jill and said, "are you alright, you don't seem like yourself today?"

Derren Brown manipulated a change of mind, Jesus engaged the cooperation of the sick man. Do you want to be well? Perhaps we need to take a cue from the psalmist. He indulges in a good moan from time to time.

*I am poor and needy,
and my heart is wounded within me.*

²³ *I fade away like an evening shadow;
I am shaken off like a locust.*

²⁴ *My knees give way from fasting;
my body is thin and gaunt.*

²⁵ *I am an object of scorn to my accusers;
when they see me, they shake their heads.*

He describes his situation. But then he goes on to say;

*With my mouth I will greatly extol the Lord;
in the great throng of worshipers I will praise him.*

³¹ *For he stands at the right hand of the needy,
to save their lives from those who would condemn them.*

And perhaps that gives us a clue. It's not unreasonable to be honest about things that go wrong from time to time. It's not wrong to be frank about being hurt by people, and candid about wrongs we suffer. But it is unhelpful to be stuck there. In the end we are only hurting ourselves, as my friend Jill discovered.

This was challenging me as I wrote it, because I like a good moan from time to time. But I know that to just moan about something doesn't actually make me any happier. And so I have a challenge for you. What is it that you moan about? What do you like to complain about? Is it something you can change? Or is it something you need to accept?

What is that that has come to mind as I said that? Perhaps God is challenging you to look at it in a different light.

It's a bit late to make this a Lenten discipline, but I challenge all of us to think positively for the rest of this week, and not to moan. Do you want to be made well? Would we say yes?

Do you want to be made well? Or, do you want to be challenged, do you want to learn, to grow, to change, or are you content as you are?

Are you happy to allow others and their behaviour to make you unhappy or angry, or do you want to take control of your own life and choose to move beyond hurt or anger or discomfort.

It's not about pretending that bad stuff doesn't happen. It's not about denying our normal and honest reactions of hurt and anger. It's about acknowledging all of that and then finding ways to move beyond it. Taking responsibility for our own feelings and thoughts and not allowing others' behaviour to dictate to us. Do you want to be well? Let's say YES!