

MAY 9th Acts 16:9-15: John 9:1-5 'Unexpected Gifts of Grace'

Our two readings remind us to expect unexpected gifts of Grace from God. For the man at the pool: it was a day of surprise when into his life comes Jesus of Nazareth with a gift of Grace that brought a changed life. For the Apostle Paul: a dream of surprise. Paul had his plans but as we all experience - well laid plans can change suddenly and in this case bring a new direction and an opportunity to extend God's work.

Let's look first at this reading from John. Here we have unsolicited healing and an unprovoked expression of grace which is in contrast to the healing that comes just before at the end of the previous chapter. Here we read about the healing of a royal official's son. Jesus was in Cana when a royal official, who had travelled from Capernaum where his son lay close to death, came and begged him to return with him and heal his son. Jesus' reply to this request was "Unless you people see miraculous signs and wonders, you will never believe." The royal official countered, "Sir, come down before my child dies." To this, Jesus says: "You may go. Your son will live." And it was so and the official and all his household believed.

Returning to the man by the pool, there is no request to Jesus for healing, or any hint of faith on the part of this sick man. He is actually a passive recipient of a remarkable gift and his life is changed forever. We don't really know what this man's ailment was, but it had kept him for nearly 40 years from getting into this pool of Bethesda - or House of Mercy which certainly fits in with what happens. Whether this pool, which was deep enough to dive into, really offered healing qualities is another matter, but reality or not, the people certainly gathered around it hoping for a miracle.

Into this scenario, steps Jesus of Nazareth with healing in his touch. Unlike the Royal Official, we are not certain whether this man knew who Jesus actually was. We are given the impression he had not heard of Jesus. Certainly the later verses in chapter 5 confirm this. Perhaps his life had been lived around this pool with his only focus: trying to get into it.

It is Jesus who comes to this man and offers to him unconditional grace by asking of the man, 'Do you want to get well?'. His reply is a rambling tale of how he has been trying to get to the water for years but no one is there to help him. Jesus response to this is 'Pick up your mat and walk'. Thirty-eight years he had been there on that mat struggling to get up every time the water bubbled from deep below. Yet, there was sufficient strength, and yes, faith within him to listen to the words of Jesus and act. He made the effort to take his mat, and, together with the power from Jesus, walk.

Let's pause here ponder his story for our own journey. How small a world do we confine ourselves too by not having complete faith in Jesus, the Risen Christ? Do we limit ourselves by not expecting the gift of Grace to be present. There are so many things in this life which can overwhelm and/or defeat us or there are plans, goals we would like to achieve. When we have intensity of desire and determination to make the effort, hopeless though it may seem, the power of Christ gets its opportunity. With Christ we can overcome the circumstances of our life that at times hold us down, confine us, cause our belief to deflate and flatten into a straight line signally lack of hope, faith, meaning, strength, death of the dreams. Through the gift of God's grace, we are able to rise renewed, on wings of eagles so to speak; hope rekindled; energy rising and we can stand with Spirit filled strength and attitude ready to overcome; to hold the darkness at bay with the transforming power of the Risen Christ.

What about Paul's experience? What does it have to say to us? Acts 16 is the account of Paul's second missionary journey (about 49/50AD) and it takes that crucial step that carries the Gospel into Europe with Lydia, as far as it is known, the first European convert to Christianity.

We saw the spread of Christianity with the coming of the Gentiles into the Christian story when Peter baptised Cornelius and his household. Now, with in this journey, as recorded by Luke, Grace is flowing now to the world at large. And so it seems fitting that the impetus for so significant a development should be cloaked by a certain numinous quality. Paul experiences a vision of a man from

Macedonia - Greece - inviting him to come!!! For Paul this is the voice of God and he makes preparations to sail.

There is a lesson in what happens now for us to absorb into our own lives: This vision came at an interesting time in these travels of Paul. He had plans made but none were coming to pass. Paul and Silas, later Timothy and eyewitness, Luke, were travelling from town to town. Paul was delivering the messages from the apostles and elders from the Council held previously in Jerusalem and together with the presence of the Holy Spirit, the churches were strengthened in faith and growing daily. However, this is where we meet Paul's planning and God's planning. As we read in the Acts it seems doors were being closed and Paul was unable, as he had planned, to travel through to Asia and visit the Christians in Ephesus, Galatia and the communities mentioned in the book of Revelation.

One could imagine Paul sitting drumming his fingers on the table thinking "what is happening here?" Then comes the vision and God's plan, is revealed. And through this open door, the party of missionaries set sail for Macedonia enroute to Philippi, a Roman colony and the leading city of that district. We find Paul on the Sabbath going outside the city gate to the river to find the Jewish place of prayer (a synagogue could only be built when there were ten men present). They started to speak to the women who had gathered there particularly Lydia, a dealer in purple cloth from the city of Thyatira who was a worshiper of God. It sounds like Lydia was one of, if not the leader of this small Jewish community and thus would certainly have been the key person to share the Good News of Jesus. And the Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul's message and she and the members of her household were baptised. And in keeping with the tradition of hospitality, Paul and his companions stayed with her teaching and establishing the Christian community. This is a watershed in the history of the church: the first inroads into Europe and the first convert and community in Europe.

Now let's face it: in our own lives sometimes it seems to us that doors are being shut in our faces. We make plans, nothing happens. We drum our fingers and wonder "where is God? Are you aware of me; I am trying you know?" It would have seemed

natural for Paul to go to Asia - western Turkey - and visit the Christians there. But such action was not in God's plans. But then quietly, another door opens. Now note here: Paul is aware; he is listening and knows the voice of God - and is able to make the changes. He is flexible and trusting knowing God's way is the better way.

Are we flexible and trusting to changes in our planning?

Are we God aware; sensitive to the voice of God; listening for the voice of God in whatever way it may come: through scripture, prayers, the counsel of others. Unexpected gifts of God's grace come our way. But are we ready for them. Or are we wanting to hold on to, even to grip, **our plans**.

You know, while The Bible is the record for how God has acted and how men and women have responded, our Scripture is also a **present** source of encouragement, inspiration and direction. Its stories encourage us to trust this same God with our struggles, plans and our hopes. Specific words, readings from Scripture, can through the Spirit strike home and give us personal and specific guidance for today. There is a gift of Grace given to us as we find in those words from the Bible the help we may be desperately needing or just quietly finding a home in our hearts we can draw on from time to time for peace, hope and strength. Those words together with prayer, faith, trust, wise counsel and reflection forms the foundation upon which we build our lives, our faith journey; where we uncover unexpected gifts of God's grace.

Our two readings give us guidance and insight and call us to remember that God is at work in our lives right at this moment in time. The God who surprised the man beside the pool; and who surprised Paul is the very God who surprises us on our faith journey -- individually and collectively. Be open and ready to receive them. Amen