

# *A Homily for Tuesday 4 of Lent*

## *At Our Lady of Lincoln*

**Sermons and Homilies** The liturgical reform of the Second Vatican Council ordered us clergy to replace the custom of preaching sermons with the preaching of homilies. Just before I was first ordained it had been the custom for Bishop's House to send out a fat letter each year, telling the clergy what they should preach about every Sunday. The choice of subjects used to reflect the decision of the Bishop about what the people needed to beef up on: Papal Infallibility, second Sunday after Pentecost; Errors of Protestants, feast of the Immaculate Conception; need for Ecclesiastical Education Fund Donations, First Class Double of the Holy Trinity.

**Reading the Lectionary** One of the things that a minister has to do in preaching homilies is to explain the Scripture read out at this particular Mass; and this involves deciding why the mind of the Lectionary has selected this particular arrangement of Scripture.

**The Mind of the Lectionary** In these things the Vatican's mind is elephantine in its memorial power. Today, for instance, I detect the traces of an ancient practice (which held sway for centuries) of including today's Gospel in a selection of readings for catechumens on their way to Baptism at Easter; it was the central panel of a triptych, of which the first panel was Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus, which you may remember takes place by night, and the last panel was the story of the blind man which we read last Sunday: a story which rejoices in the full light of day. Examination of our liturgy today confirms that the Vatican lectionary indeed has this in mind: because what unites both readings and psalm is the theme of water.

**Oops** However, I find myself coming a little unstuck here: because, although our Gospel is full of water, it is not through water that the paralysed man is healed, but by his meeting with Jesus, which renders the water a passing detail in the story. Indeed, some have seen the stirring of the waters, attributed to an angel in a very few textual sources, for which our man is always grumpily late, as an image of the Jewish Law which was "mediated by angels"; and even the five porches are sometimes taken as an image of the Torah, the five books of Moses: figuratively, this poor man has sheltered in the Law for thirty-eight years, and Jesus cures him on a first encounter. Saint Augustine tells us that thirty-eight years is the period of Israel's wandering in the desert specified by Deuteronomy 2: 14, which again puts the paralysed man into a Jewish context rather than a baptismal one.

**Our Untested Hopes** So let us assume that our man is *waiting vainly* for the healing of his frustration and pain beside a water which will always disappoint him. In this we can identify with him; because our multicoloured world offers *us* endless promises of fulfilment and healing, which we tend to believe - as long as they cost us a great deal of effort and money. Even when we cannot identify any way forward in our life, the presence of that mighty engine, the media, which is full of *potential* ways of getting better, richer, and more beautiful, consoles us with the thought that, *had we but world enough, and time*, we should not find it hard to be made happy.

**The Lenten Desert** Only if we have been thorough in our Lenten observance, perhaps, are we likely to have entertained the dread possibility that there is something incurable about us. This paralysed man has wasted thirty-eight years in the fond belief that healing and strength lie a few feet away. Well might Jesus say to him: *Do you truly want to be well again?*

**Ezekiel** I would not like to let this evening pass without a good look at the first reading. We find this reading in that lovely Easter chant for the rite of Asperges, *Vidi Aquam. I saw water flowing from the right side of the Temple, and wherever the water reached they were saved.* There are many people for whom their baptism is a past event, and they say *I was baptised.* Let this reading flow in our minds tonight, and in our lives. Let it remind us that when we were brought to the Temple and passed through the stream of living water, we set out on a journey; a journey irrigated constantly by the stream in which we were immersed. We walk through life, not as frightened people lost in a desert, but as faithful followers of a watercourse. Even if we pass through the Bitter Valley, it becomes a place of springs, and we walk with ever-growing strength, drinking with greater and greater knowledge of the water that flows beside us, as it guides us through the rocks, towards the places of pasture. We should always say, not *I was*, but *I am baptised.* And if our understanding at the beginning was trivial, if the flowing of water over us was a mere Tridentine trickle, it is not so now; because the promised mercy of God which flows beside us becomes a firm presence, and then a source of amazing power and beauty, and at last an immense river, impossible to cross, whose urgent power tells us the way to go forward with an authority we cannot contradict. This is where we may expect to find the perennial fruits of renewal and healing promised in the Scripture; and as it is the habit of humanity to gather and build cities at the mouths of great rivers, so this one guides us, not in the desert alone, but into belonging to the multitude of the baptised, whose home must always be on the holy shores it offers to us.

**La Piscina Probatica** So I return to my poor man, the man I left lying by the pool, paralysed - in body, certainly: but also in his spirit: and I must read in his story the mercy of Jesus, who knows our fallen nature so clearly as he looks on this man's wasted life. He stands over us, and knows all that has passed us by, and how we have kept our longing for wholeness in the safe realms of our dreams.

And there I have to stop, and you must preach to yourself the last lines. I think that I must leave you to supply the real meaning of his words to you: *arise* (he can say that to all of us, because the grave still has sovereignty over our life) *arise, pick up what you are lying on, whatever has disabled you, whatever has slaughtered you: and walk.*