

## ASH WEDNESDAY

Each year at the beginning of Lent, our Holy Father St. Benedict gives us a programme by which we may become '*capaces Spiritus*'. Before reflecting on that programme and applying it to our own Lent, I should like to consider a short passage from St. John's Gospel, ch.5: 1-9. It bears some resemblances to this process of becoming '*capaces*' of the Lord's action in our lives, as well as some notable differences, themselves instructive.

Near the pool at Bethesda with its five porticoes, there lay a large number of ill people, blind, lame and crippled. St. Bede interprets this as referring to "those without the light of knowledge; those who have not the strength to do what they are commanded; those who have not the marrow of heavenly love." In short, the sick man whom Jesus singles out mysteriously from the rest for His attention is a representative of sinful mankind, powerless to help itself. The man has been looking with fascination, even longing, for a long time at the water, which in its turn, represents the life of the Spirit effected in us by baptism. One might conjecture that he desires to be '*capax*' of receiving the Spirit; he even knows that when the Spirit moves, when it stirs the water, he could be cured of his soul's infirmities by descending into the pool, the capacity. But he is resigned, says one commentator, always to be late. The expectancy of a person who is truly *capax* has become, in him, listlessness and resignation. He does not so much renounce his will as lack willpower altogether. He has not yet created the conditions for receiving the gift of God.

Now we see the kindness of God in action. Jesus stops and, as it were, supplies for the lack of will in the crippled man. *Do you want to be well?*(v.6). The man does not reply directly but makes what may have been a querulous excuse: *Sir, I have no one to put me into the pool when the water is stirred up; while I am on my way, someone else gets down there before me.* However faint, there is a barely formulated request in these words. It is not the ringing affirmation of faith that Jesus usually required of the sick He intended to cure, but He accepts it as sufficient. He does not answer in the manner the crippled perhaps expected; He does not help him into the pool. Instead He says: *Rise, take up your mat and walk.* (v.7). Jesus seems to do all the work here; He makes the man *capax* to receive healing and then works the cure. The nature of faith as gift is thus made very clear. P. Bouyer comments that, in this page of Scripture, we have the initiative of God, who provokes the request to which He wishes to respond. At the very moment of the man's despair, Jesus steps in and puts it aside abruptly. But it is not an encouragement of passivity. He takes the kernel of desire in the man and creates a capacity in him. He intends to make the man well, so that he may walk in a new life. The man is made whole for service, for a life in obedience to God's commands. The capacity is given him, moreover, so that he may co-operate in becoming more and more *capax*.

It may seem incongruous at first sight to link up these remarks with our Lenten observances, but not when we remember that part of our purpose in Lent is to create a capacity to welcome God into our hearts and a continuing readiness to respond to His action, in faith, hope and love. This capacity is formed by our real desire to be made whole, in spite of the time we have wasted in inventing reasons for our inaction and reluctance to plunge into the pool, the waters of grace. Encounter with Christ closes our lips on these subterfuges. *Do you want to be well?* If we answer ‘yes’, we have to rise and walk in the shadow and the light of the Cross. His attentiveness to us, in spite of our lethargy or even coldness, has brought a new energy to life in us.

Our Lenten resolutions are an expression of our desire for well-ness, for wholeness. We do it, negatively, by our renunciations, especially those things which hinder the health of our soul, the ‘evil habits’, and ‘negligences’, the ‘needless talking’ and even the ‘idle jesting’ mentioned by St. Benedict.

We renounce good things too, such as food, to the measure of our ability and by permission of another, so that even our self-denial is checked by objective standards and another person’s estimation. In this way a proud individuality has little chance of asserting itself; the capacity we aim to create will not become a monument to hubris.

We express our desire for spiritual wholeness positively by “adding something beyond the usual measure of our service”. St. Benedict mentions prayers with tears, reading and compunction. These things hollow out the heart, since they imply a sorrow that levels pride and introduces a sweet and modest joy. The sinner by the pool of grace knows his own history of inertia and ingratitude. When the Creator of the waters passes by and offers direct access to His saving power, there is a surge of the hope that looks forward with spiritual longing to total salvation. This is not a purely private development. We are made well in order to follow Christ, which is to fulfil the law of love. St. Augustine, in his Tractates in St. John, has this beautiful passage: “Take up your bed, Our Lord says, meaning, when you were powerless, your neighbour carried you; now you are made whole, carry your neighbour... Carry him with whom you walk, that you may come to Him with whom you desire to abide.”

Our Lenten observance, then, is meant to restore our own health and give health to others. A third consideration is the most vital. In entering into our own purified hearts through self-denial and good zeal, through prayer and repentance, we are allowing ourselves to be conformed to Jesus Christ in His passion and death. We are becoming capaces, by His elective kindness, to receive the Holy Spirit, the water of life, which flows from His side on the Cross.