

APRIL 1, 2025 FATHER PETER JAE CHOI

There is a story told about a mother who came to Napoleon on behalf of her son, who was about to be executed. The mother pleaded with Napoleon for mercy, but he refused, saying, “Your son failed in his duty, not once but twice. So he deserves justice, not mercy.” And she replied, “Yes, of course you’re right. He doesn’t deserve mercy. But if he deserved it, it wouldn’t be called mercy. I am pleading for mercy!” Napoleon was impressed with her answer, so he spared her son with this verdict, “unmerited pardon, the result of mercy!”

The truth is every single one of us falls short of God’s mercy. It is through his compassion and generosity that we receive mercy. If we deserve it, then it wouldn’t be mercy. If we paid for it, then it wouldn’t be a gift. But, Mercy is a gift that God gives freely, fully paid for by Jesus on the cross. Just imagine, if Napoleon could be convinced of mercy in a situation where there was no relationship, no care or concern for the woman, imagine the mercy we can expect from our loving God! God’s relationship with us is entirely motivated by His love and mercy. This gift of God’s mercy should be received and celebrated with gratitude, each and every day.

In the gospel, we heard about the story of a man who had been ill for 38 years who was sitting by the pool called Beth-zatha. The name Beth-zatha or Bethesda means house of mercy. This pool is located near St. Anne’s Church in Jerusalem, just a short distance from the Sheep Gate. This gate was called the sheep gate for the simple reason that the animals for the temple sacrifice were brought in through this gate, an important detail which we will get to later.

This pool of Bethzatha was divided into 2 pools, by a central partition. The southern pool is believed to have been used for mikveh or ritual bath where Jerusalem's pilgrims would go to purify themselves for worship. The northern pool was a reservoir that continually replenished and repurified the southern pool with fresh water. There was a popular superstitious belief that when the fresh water flowed into the northern pool and the water started to bubble up, it was believed to be the angel of the Lord stirring up the water. So people mistakenly believed that when this happened, only the first person to enter the pool would be healed, until the healing properties quickly vanished away. So, the house of mercy really wasn't for everyone, as it was making people compete against each other for the first position like athletes competing for the gold medal. We all know only one person wins the gold and everybody else loses.

We are told that this man needed help in getting to the pool because he was sick, and since he was there alone he stood no chance of ever receiving the healing he wanted. This simple interaction between Jesus and this man revealed much about him and flaws in his character. When Jesus asked him if he wanted to be made well, he began to complain about how no one cared, how no one was there to help and that someone would always beat him in the race. And after Jesus commanded him to walk, he received an instant healing and began to walk. But as soon as people questioned him as to why he was carrying the mat, he began to blame Jesus, "the man who made me well told me to carry it." Moments later, Jesus walked up to him in the temple and told him not to sin again. As you can see, this paralytic man was an old, lonely, sick man who liked to complain and blame, and a sinner that no one cared about. Does this person sound like someone who deserved mercy and healing? My guess is probably not! So why did Jesus heal him? Because God's love

and mercy knows no boundaries and has no limitations. When the water from the pool failed to bring him healing, it was Jesus, His love and mercy that healed him!

In the first reading, prophet Ezekiel sees a vision of the temple of the Lord, and the superabundant stream of water flowing from the temple. This water of life springing from the Temple gave life and restored the ground to be fertile again. It was a vision showing that God was the source of healing and restoration for the land, the nation and the people. One important detail for us to remember would be that when Ezekiel had this vision, there was no temple standing in Jerusalem. Solomon's Temple, which previously stood there, had been destroyed 13 years earlier by Nebuchadnezzar when he conquered Jerusalem and deported the people to Babylon. This being the case, what Ezekiel was seeing was not Solomon's temple, but the New Temple. Do you remember when Jesus referred to Himself as the New Temple when He said, "Destroy this temple and I will raise it up on the third day." With this in mind, let's revisit the sheep gate. St. John was a theologian, and details are very important in his gospel. So when St. John said that Jesus was by the pool, he is deliberately telling us that Jesus entered Jerusalem through the sheep gate, because He was the Sacrificial Lamb of God whose death on the cross was the atonement for the sins of the world. His death has won for us God's mercy and the gift of eternal life. Just like the story of Napoleon I told at the beginning of the homily, while it is so easy for us to want justice, that is to live our lives our own way and to give what is due, Jesus shows us another way, which is the way of mercy and compassion. It has the power to heal and give life!