

There's more to being ill !

[We can imagine that Jesus would have known many of the people who came to him to be healed, and maybe conversations like this one could have taken place]

It was another overcast day. One of those days which enters into the souls of some sensitive people. Eldad easily made room for the day. He lay across the doorway. On most fine days his brother carried him out to the shade of their lime tree, but when rain threatened Eldad could not expect to be carried in and out with every shower. It was more convenient to stay inside. Days were usually long anyway, but dreary ones like this seemed to last for ever.

It was a relief then, to receive visitors, although Eldad could not readily throw off his gloomy mood. He had heard a great deal about the Rabbi from Nazareth and reports of how he was supposed to be able to heal people. His brother, Noah had suggested he should have a word with Simon, who was an old friend. He knew Simon was interested in the Rabbi. Eldad was reluctant to ask and hesitated for many days before he was persuaded to agree a meeting.

Simon had managed to get Jesus away. The crowds which were always around him now, had lessened with the change in the weather and in any case the early afternoon was always quiet. He did not know Eldad that well, though Noah was a friend of many years. He and his brother were builders, like their father before them. However, Simon was surprised to see Eldad. He had a mental picture of him as being like his brother, tall and broad, a strapping man. Now he was shocked to see his weak, emaciated body. He had no feeling at all below his waist.

After brief introductions, Simon launched into conversation in his usual tactless manner. "I heard about your accident."

Eldad turned on him with a withering stare. "Does news take that long to go round Capernaum ? It was three years ago last month." His gaze fixed on Simon. "So people are just learning about it ! I thought most had forgotten. I'm parked here and hardly see a soul all day, except the girl who comes to clean and get meals."

"I know a little about you." Jesus interrupted saving Simon a reply. "Your cousin Benjamin was in Nazareth soon after your accident. But why not tell me all about yourself."

"Is that part of the healing ?" The unbelieving tone coloured his question. "You have come to heal me, I suppose. I hear you're rather good at that."

Jesus ignored both question and comment. "Tell me how it happened. I heard you fell from a roof."

"It wasn't the falling that did it," Eldad could still tell the story well. "No, it was the landing. If some fool hadn't left a cart just where I fell, the sand underneath was soft enough to save me. I fell right through the cart. A sliver of wood went into my back."

Peter winced. He had a vivid imagination, and a personal knowledge of pain.

"I've never been able to walk since that day," Eldad concluded. "Now I'm useless. Just a burden to my brother. I often wish I'd made a better job of it and killed myself when I fell."

He stopped for a moment. He had obviously thought about that deeply. "There's not much to life here anyhow. Just being dragged out to sit in the yard everyday."

"You'll see people who pass," Peter said, "And there must be friends who call by."

"Not many," Eldad's face twisted. "You find your real friends when you're like this, and I can tell you there aren't as many as you think."

There was another pause. Eldad looked at Jesus, expecting him to say something, and when he did not, he felt he had to fill the silence. "It's the sheer frustration and humiliation that's gets to me. I used to be able to wrestle Noah to the ground. Now I have to let him carry me everywhere. There are so many things my mind wants to do but my legs won't let me. It's not as though I was ill."

"But you are ill." Jesus said.

"I'm not. I've just got a busted back." Eldad sounded irritated.

"There are more ways to being ill," Jesus replied calmly, not roused by Eldad's accusing voice.

"You're just paving the way for failure," he retorted. "If you can't heal my legs, you'll say there must be something else wrong with me. Tell me, if God cares about me as I hear you believe, why did he let me fall off a roof? Tell me that! And why had someone left the cart just where I had to fall? No! ...but I know what you'll say next, 'It's my sin!' That's what the other Rabbis say - God's punishment. Well I'll tell you, I don't mind admitting I'm a sinner, but I see a lot of other men about here with a lot more sin than I've ever thought of and they're all walking around with straight backs. Your God isn't very just." Then it all came tumbling out. "I suppose they didn't tell you the rest of the story. How I came to be living here. Two months after my accident, my Becky died giving birth to our first child. I had to be looked after so Noah brought me here. Then last year his wife died and he's left looking after me. Is that how God cares about us?"

"Do you really think God wants you to be like this ?" asked Jesus.

Eldad didn't answer. Jesus continued. "I know he doesn't. God loves you and wants you to be a whole person. There is so much we can't see about God's plans for us, Eldad."

"So you think he has plans for me ?" Eldad was getting angry now. "What future have I got stuck here. I'm no use to anyone. And don't say it will be for the good of my soul. It's my body needs some good right now." Eldad's voice grew even stronger. Peter came forward, protective of Jesus. Eldad saw the movement. "Don't worry Peter, I'm not likely to get up and hit him."

Jesus knelt down by Eldad, and reached for his hand. Eldad drew it away sharply. "Eldad," he said, making him meet his eyes. "God is a father to us. Would a real father want his son to be like this. Would a real father punish his son in this way. How could you imagine God doing worse things than you would have done with your child. This isn't punishment for your sins. But on the other hand, all that bitterness inside you; all that unforgiveness; all that anger with God; all your fear and frustration is stopping you from knowing he is your father, and does want you to be whole. God doesn't want to punish you for your sins, he wants to forgive you and give you a life free from sin - life with his Spirit in you. What you're doing is judging and punishing yourself. If God heals you there is much for you to do. If he doesn't make you walk again, he still has a purpose for your life."

"Huh !" grunted Eldad. Jesus' voice had calmed him a little. "But you can walk. You don't understand. You want to try it, lying on your back all day"

"I understand a lot more than you know," said Jesus. "And I feel it. But I can't prove that to you now. I'm going now, but I want you to know that God wants to heal you."

"Well, aren't you going to do it now ?"

Eldad revealed the secret hope behind all his defences. "No, not now," said Jesus. Both Eldad and Peter recoiled visibly. "You will be healed, but in God's time and when you're ready to be made a whole person."

Jesus rose, moved through the doorway and out across the yard. Peter got up quickly to follow him. Jesus called back from the gateway, "You know, Eldad, your name, Eldad. It means 'God's friend'. "I will see you - soon."

Eldad sank back on his bed, angry and disappointed. He had time to think - much time, and his thoughts were not so much on Jesus' words, but on the man's personality. It seemed even now he was still in the room.

It was in the long night hours of wakefulness that it came to him. He couldn't explain it, but he knew he had to get to Jesus. He knew this man could heal him - or at least God could, through him. He had a lot to put right first.

Noah was used to being wakened by his brother. A gentle and patient man, some said he had been chosen for Eldad. However, it was a long time since he had seen his brother so excited.

"Why the change?" he asked. Eldad had seem so opposed to going to seeing Jesus again when he told of yesterday's visit.

"I can't explain," Eldad replied, "but I've got to get there."

It was Eldad himself who thought out all the details. Noah could find three others - Eldad had many more friends than he supposed. They could soon make a stretcher bed with some scaffold poles and a mattress.

They hadn't bargained for the house being full or the ill-manners of religious people who wanted to hear about God's love but never do it. Eldad was not going to give in. "I'm going to get in there if it kills me!"

"If it kills you you won't need to get in!" Eldad suddenly realised how he'd missed Noah's dry humour.

In the end it was quite a memorable afternoon - a roof broken open - a dramatic entry - Pharisees put in their place by Jesus - a whole change of life - a new back - walking again - but more - a whole new life of freedom for Eldad - but all that is another story.