

Healing

This morning I'm going to think about healing. I wonder what the word 'healing' means to you? Do you think of charismatic healing services with much laying on of hands and shouts of joy? Or places like Lourdes? Or hospitals, doctors, nurses, operations, medication? Or a kiss and a band-aid? Or perhaps you suffer from something you would love to be healed of, or know somebody in that situation? Or do you think of the healing of the nations, the healing of conflict and war (plenty of that right now) or the healing of the earth in these times of climate breakdown? Or maybe you think of all of those things. Having widened the field of view, I'm going to narrow it down again or we'd be here all day, there's too much to cover. Let's think about our church, and ourselves.

On the 18th of October, Wednesday, it's St Luke's day, but we're celebrating that today. I feel sure that St Luke doesn't mind that it's the wrong day. Luke, who wrote two books in the bible: the Gospel that bears his name, and the Acts of the Apostles. St Paul wrote of him as, '*Luke, the beloved physician*' (Colossians 4:14), so we know he was a doctor. The fact that he was a doctor means that he would have used traditional methods to help healing to take place: herbal medicines, ointments, massage, manipulation, splints, dressings, surgery, and so on. Perhaps too he laid on hands and prayed for healing as well, combining what we might call the spiritual or charismatic with the more conventional arts of his profession. In today's gospel reading, from Luke's gospel, Jesus commissions 70 people to go out and preach the gospel of the Kingdom, including the command, *cure the sick* (Luke 10:9). Most of you will know that I was a doctor (now retired!), so this feels quite personal.

What exactly do we mean by 'healing'? Funnily enough, it's not a word used a lot in the medical profession. It is used when we talk about a wound healing up. So when a surgical incision, or a leg ulcer, or a cut we get after a fall heals up, then we will say, 'it's healed'. Perhaps the word isn't used much as it's not really something doctors do: the body does it. By and large, our bodies have absolutely amazing, God-given powers of healing and what the medical profession does is simply helping our bodies and minds to recover themselves by creating the right environment to do that. Without that inbuilt ability to self-heal, to regrow new tissue, to fight infection and even cancer cells, we really can't stay alive.

The word 'healing', and its related word, 'health', come from the old Germanic word *hælan* and means the state of being whole, sound, very much the same meaning as the beautiful Hebrew word, *shalom*, which means healing, peace or wholeness. So a healed leg is now *whole* again. But these words for healing or wholeness share a root with the word *holy* as well. That means that they were once the same word carrying all those meanings. Whole, heal, health, hale, holy. There is a sacredness to the process of healing, an embrace of the holy, of God, and a sacredness to wholeness. I want to say that without God, wholeness, healing is not complete. It's a lot more, and awful lot more, than just a Band-aid.

We live in times of incredible health care, despite the enormous pressure on the NHS at the moment. We take it for granted, most of the time, but it's a very recent phenomenon. Anaesthetics were only discovered in the 19th century, penicillin in the middle of the 20th century. Vaccination against many infectious diseases are routinely offered to our children so that we no longer see polio, diphtheria or tetanus, for example. Think of the incredible speed that the Covid vaccines were rolled out. You may have heard that an effective vaccine against malaria has been developed and is about to be made available. But still, there is plenty of sickness and ill-health around. Some of it comes in a direct line from the way we choose to live.

So why are we talking about this in church? Why don't we just leave it all to the medical profession? Well, we know that healing was an important part of Jesus' ministry, for one thing. Secondly, because when we talk about 'wholeness', we are starting to talk about something bigger than antibiotics or radiotherapy or new hips, wonderful though those forms of treatment are. Wholeness, '*Shalom*' stretches beyond bodies and minds to the way we live our lives, the depth of our relationships with one another, to our place on planet earth, to how we are with God.

There's a paradox here though. Let me speak with gentleness now. I think we will all have met people who are chronically sick, or disabled, and yet who carry with them a sense of wholeness, maybe even joy, who know how to live with what they have. On the other hand, we will know people who are hale and hearty, fit as a fiddle and yet don't know how to live properly, who perhaps harbour resentment, addiction or selfishness or just plain

unhappiness. Who most needs healing, and what would healing mean? Wholeness, healing, goes far beyond the purely physical. Perhaps it is here that the church, and prayer, has most to offer.

Church, at its best, is a healing community. Just for a moment, let's think big, let's think about how that could be. Let's start at the door: the welcome. To people who are lonely, depressed, struggling with life, with sexuality or gender identity; to the disabled, to foreigners, as well as the happy and healthy and well-adjusted - the welcome, the friendship we receive here, without judgement - can be life-giving. Some years ago, two young Ugandan teenagers, brother and sister, turned up at our teenage group, Elements, which Vicky and I used to lead. It was hard work to integrate them because of their poor English and bewilderment at British culture. A few years later, after they had moved on, I met them for a pizza. They told me just how much they had been helped in their transition to life here by the welcome they received in that group. It had been really important for them. It was a kind of healing. I was, I confess, surprised – it had been an effort. So, building friendships, building community can be hard work, not always plain sailing. But it can be restoring, healing, life-giving. For we are all made for relationships, for acceptance, for love and when we receive that, and give it, we are on the road to wholeness.

Think about the confession for a moment. It's a time when we are invited to reflect, to consider our faults and failings. We perhaps tend to think about things we have done wrong to others, but what about to ourselves? St Paul said this: *'Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God, and that you are not your own? For you were bought with a price; therefore, glorify God in your body.'* (1 Corinthians 6:19,20). Is there something you are doing – or not doing! – which is leading you away from wholeness, that is not honouring the Holy Spirit within the temple of your body? Could the confession be an invitation, an opportunity, to leave behind an unhealthy lifestyle, an addiction or obsession, an unhealthy relationship? And lead you towards wholeness, and holiness?

Think about the absolution: the declaration that we are forgiven, accepted, loved. That we may stand up straight in the presence of God, in the presence our brothers and sisters knowing that we are, in the words of the hymn *'Ransomed, healed, restored, forgiven'*. For we can be only truly whole, only truly healed when that fundamental, primal relationship with God is in place. And guess what? It's a free gift.

Think about the peace: the sharing of the peace of Christ with one another, that sign – almost a sacrament, really – that we are at peace with one another, at peace with God, that we are a joyful, loving community of faith. Let that reality enter us, allow it to touch us, to know that *peace which the world cannot give*, which Jesus promised us (John 14:27).

And then the Eucharist, the Holy Communion itself. There is a tradition which views the consecrated bread and wine as a kind of medicine, an elixir of life and of healing. As we receive the bread and wine this morning, the body and blood of Christ, what malady, what weakness, what gap in our wholeness can we apply this to? Perhaps we can consciously place that in our hands as we reach out for the bread and the wine this morning. We can continue to do that as we stand, week by week around the sacred table, in communion with one another and with Christ.

At the end of the service there is going to be a laying-on of hands and prayer for healing, for wholeness, for holiness, for anyone who wishes to come. It can be a real moment of encounter. We sense a need, decide to come for prayer and then literally embody that desire by walking over to the prayer place, verbalising our need and then receiving prayer, receiving too the gentle laying on of hands. I don't know what will happen, but it's a safe, a good, a holy place to be in. What it will bring?

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