

prayer & healing

a sermon preached on the

2nd sunday after pentecost

29 May 2016

at

st john's

ANGLICAN CHURCH CAMBERWELL

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the lections: 1 Kings 8:22-23,41-43, Psalm 96:1-9, Galatians 1:1-12, Luke 7:1-10

The liturgical calendar has brought us to the almost six-month period of 'Sundays after Pentecost' – these 'green time' Sundays – to a sustained period of reflection on the gospel as interpreted through the lens of Luke the evangelist.

Luke is popularly known in Christian tradition as 'physician', and we find that Luke does indeed highlight Jesus' healing encounters with people. On this very first day of returning to Luke it is with a 'healing' story, the familiar account of the Roman centurion and his slave at death's door.¹ We prayed the familiar words of the centurion as our confessional rite today: "Lord, I am not worthy to have you come under my roof; but only speak the word, and let me be healed".²

There are two questions I want to reflect upon today. What is the nature of 'healing' which Jesus, through the Lukan lens, is setting before us? What does Christian 'healing' mean in our time?

When approaching the stories of healing in the gospels, it is necessary to disabuse ourselves of the centuries and the layers of literalising and concretising of the Scriptures. It is simply impossible that the Jesus of the gospels is promoting the idea – so pervasive in the churches – that the purpose of discipleship is being able to convince God to bend the laws of nature in order to get what we want. We simply have to constantly remind ourselves that everything in the gospels – including the 'healing miracles' – must be read through the lens of the Paschal Mystery. If we don't get that, we are likely to mis-read everything.

And we cannot ignore the fact that there are profound mission implications here. Increasing numbers of people have given up on the churches because of pervasive teachings which promote a literalist magical-supernatural view of God, prayer, and healing. This is a critical issue in our time, which we ignore at our peril.

Jesus' prayer is *not* focussed on getting what he wants, on saving his own skin. Indeed, it's very clear that the opposite is the case. Origen correctly summarised the prayer of Jesus in the memorable saying: "Prayer is not about getting benefits from God; but about becoming more like God".³ Jesus' prayer is focussed on becoming more like God: "Not my will but yours be done".⁴ We are to emulate the Master.

When we grasp this, it becomes possible to see what the true healing is in today's gospel story. Remembering that this story immediately follows Luke's 'Sermon on the Plain'⁵ – in which Jesus reinterprets the Law of Moses – we see that what's being healed is the narrow tribalistic, purity-bound ideology of the Law as interpreted by the religious leaders.⁶ It is the whole of Israel that is being offered healing. The ritual purity of Leviticus is being replaced with a new and higher standard: "Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful".⁷ The 'sermon' itself is a healing miracle. As he concludes his teaching, Jesus moved literally beyond the boundary of tribal purity, to 'gentile' territory, to Capernaum; and the first significant character to make an appearance is an unclean and 'polluted' foreigner soldier.

If we cannot get beyond a literal reading of this text, all we will see is an imagined literal healing of an unnamed, unseen slave. So what? But if we can grasp that what we're reading is not news reportage, but theology, then we can begin to see that the true focus of healing is not this person, but the whole nation of Israel. This 'healing' is part of the earlier 'healing'.

Seen in this way, it is clear that the true 'healing' is the healing of the narrow tribalistic and purity-obsessed religion which they inherited. The Law is being transcended. Sadly, for all his apostolic genius, St Paul was not able to completely transcend tribal-puritan narrowness – calling down curses on those he

¹ Luke 7:2

² Luke 7:6-7 This liturgical version of the text shortens the original, and makes the request for healing personal.

³ Cited in Lawrence Freeman, 'Dangers of the Shallow End', *Church Times*, 3 July 2015.

⁴ Luke 22:42

⁵ Luke 6:17-49

⁶ This movement, though ambiguously adopted in Israel, was foreshadowed in Solomon's prayer at the dedication of the first Temple in Jerusalem: 1 Kings 8:41-43

⁷ Luke 6:36

disagreed with.⁸ But the centurion's message to Jesus – conveyed by his friends – expresses the miracle and mystery of God's inclusion, of the breath-takingly expansive and essentially merciful reign of Divine Love. It is the whole community that needs the 'physician'.

One last thing to note about the nature of 'healing' in the gospel story. In Luke's hands – more than any of the evangelists – this work of healing is the work of the Spirit. Though not specifically mentioned in this short episode, Luke's entire project (Luke-Acts) is a testament to the salvific work of the Spirit. The miraculous healing of tribalistic purity – the inclusion of gentiles, unclean, foreigners, and every kind of 'outsider' – is the accomplishment of the liberating Spirit. And the Spirit accomplishes this healing by the means of the unclean outsider. Israel is healed by the impure foreigner! The 'faith' which Jesus says he has not seen in Israel⁹ is born of this creative Spirit.

Well, that brings me to the second matter I want to reflect on today: the question about what Christian 'healing' means in our time. I have already noted the profound mission implications facing all the churches, so there's a global aspect to this. But closer to home, this is remarkably pertinent for us, in this parish, at this particular time, with last Sunday's Open Forum fresh in our minds – and especially with the question as to what is meant by 'spirituality' in mind. What is the 'healing' we require? What is 'stimulated spiritual vitality'?¹⁰

Bearing in mind everything I have said thus far about today's gospel story, I want to suggest that what is to be healed is whatever has become for us concrete or literal, stuck – individually, and communally. Our healing does not consist in 'getting benefits from God', but in 'becoming like God'. Healing is the miraculous movement from 'righteousness' to reconciliation; from tribal boundedness to gracious hospitality; from purity to mercy; from my will, to God's will; from grasping, to relinquishment; from mere belief, to faith; from the historic forms which have brought us this far to the new forms into which the Spirit is calling us.

'Healing', then, is the adventure in which my life becomes increasingly nourished in and shaped by the Divine call, freely submitting to the Divine authority¹¹ who is the centre of my being, 'not of a human source, but of a revelation in Christ'.¹² We can expect that our healing will bring us to revelation in Christ.

Lastly, in this light, Spirit is the *engine room* of this healing. 'Spirituality', though a noun, is not a thing, an acquisition, a book on a shelf – and certainly not a static thing, but dynamic, evolutive. 'Spiritual vitality' is simultaneously the 'method' of prayer by which the energy driving all our anxieties, fears, and preoccupations is re-directed, in the service of the healing dynamic of our becoming like God; and the very *measure* of our healing and wholeness, our Christlikeness, our becoming-like-God-ness, our resurrection.

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⁸ Galatians 1:8

⁹ Luke 7:9

¹⁰ Mission Action Plan 'Strategic Goal #1'

¹¹ Luke 7:8

¹² Galatians 1:11-12