

15th May 2011

Healing

1 Peter 2:19-25

St D 8 & 10.45

John 10:1-10

Gracious God, take my lips and speak through them, take our minds and think through them, take our lives and set them on fire with love for you. Amen.

This morning we renew our ministry of healing. It seems wise therefore to reflect a little more on what we understand 'healing' to be; what is health?

Today we know that sickness may have causes which are far more complex than we used to think; we know the body affects the mind and the mind the body, a sudden shock – perhaps a bereavement – can set off a physical illness. Or perhaps we consistently over-eat or over-drink, or smoke too much and physical damage is done. And we may dimly see that Peter's asthma, or Chris's ulcer, or Mary's arthritis or hiatus hernia, aren't just chance happenings, sent out of the blue, but related to some fear or anxiety, or anger or guilt or the struggle to survive in a competitive world. Any talk then, of sickness and healing is full of ambiguities. Is the sickness in the body or the mind? Does it need surgery, drugs, prayer, the laying on of hands, or a sympathetic listening ear?

Alongside this there lies the big stumbling block for so many: why is it that some people are physically healed while others are not?

In one of the parishes where I served I came to know a man named David. David had Motor Neurone Disease. I visited him often; I prayed with him and for him often. David's illness grew progressively worse and he died.

I don't believe it is true to say there was no healing in David's life. David had been a Post Office worker, he met and knew lots of people, but due to his illness had to give it up and

he became very isolated. During his isolation he re-found his faith and he was confirmed. David was one of the most encouraging people I've ever met and I know I'm not alone in that. Those around him: nurses, neighbours, friends were inspired by him – he even became friends with Sarah Ferguson who visited him quite often, drawn back by his extraordinary character. In fact, I would say that David was one of the most 'well' people I have ever met.

If we are to answer the question of what healing and health are, we need to first address the prior question: what is life for?

People such as David have helped me understand more fully what it might mean to be 'well'. I'm sure each person here can likewise think of others who might actually be in a lot of pain, quite sick, yet in another sense are the most 'whole' and 'well' people you know.

I can assure you that coming up to the Olympics many of our finest athletes will respond to questions about their results by saying they were only – for example – 85% fit and that's why their performance wasn't as good as they and we had hoped. I can hardly ever remember an athlete claiming to be 100% fit.

Us? None of us of course are 100% well. All of us are in need of some healing, no one is totally well and whole. So when we talk about healing, we need to remove a division between those who are 'well' and the 'sick'. We are all in need of some form of healing, we all carry some form of pain.

I would go further and suggest that many, most, perhaps all of us are in fact here because – for however a fleeting moment – we have had a glimpse of what that wholeness and well-being is about. Somewhere in our journey of faith we have glimpsed – or perhaps tasted – the goodness of God and something of God's life in all its fullness.

In the first letter of Peter we heard the words “by his wounds we have been healed”. Jesus knew more clearly than any of us that life can be unfair, painful and short: that the good do often contract terminal diseases, that the worldly do often prosper and live to a ripe old age. And yet he never doubted the power or the justice or the love of God. He addressed all people with compassion, prayed often, forgave the sins of many, healed many, touched the lives of all whom he could. And what he taught us through his life was that God can be trusted.

It is the lesson of Job, who suffered more than any of us can begin to imagine; it is the lesson of Jesus: that in sickness and in health God loves me, he is my Father and his desire is for us to trust him.

What is life for? Life is the setting in which we learn how to trust and how to love.

This is the lesson Jesus, the Good Shepherd leads us to learn. He leads us and calls us to this relationship through him with God. He leads us and calls through this relationship to have life abundantly; life in all its fullness.

Michael Mayne – whose own life was severely shaped by illness and pain – wrote this:

‘One of the lessons of the charismatic movement has been to remind us that those who take prayer and healing seriously and make large requests often see results which put our timid faith to shame.

And yet I am sometimes bothered by the assumption of enthusiastic Christians that if those who are sick only had sufficient faith they would invariably be healed physically. For that is not only nonsense, it is cruel nonsense. For what the Gospel offers us is *not* eternal health – how could it, for we all have to die – but eternal life: by which it means a quality of relationship with God in Jesus Christ which no

physical infirmity can destroy. And it is that kind of confidence and hope in God which is the real inward healing of the human spirit.’

The healing ministry on offer here today is part of the gift of God. In one sense it is the most ordinary thing we do as Christians and in another part of the most extraordinary love of God.

The healing ministry offered here today is in the welcome you received when entering this church – the welcome we give one another. It is in the eucharist we share – the life of Christ given in bread and wine. It is in the laying on of hands for those who have specific requests for themselves or loved ones – hands laid on with the prayers of the church.

It is here we bring our incompleteness to God and hear the words of Jesus “I came that you may have life, and have it abundantly.”

So be it.

Amen.