

Healing mercies appreciated

Sermon by the Rev Derek Lightbourne,,St James, October 9th 2016

Keynote Bible passage: Luke 17.11 – 19

A key feature of Jesus' earthly ministry was his showing mercy, and with compassion, in the context of people being healed. Indeed in the Order of St Luke which encourages this ministry, there is noted in the gospels some 26 + healing accounts. Bearing this in mind some may wonder why this has a relatively low profile in our ministry practice today. One reason is that in our society when one feels unwell the approach is to the doctor, and possibly hospital or medical specialist. It was quite different in Jesus' day. When a person had a particular condition they were marginalised of society. Older scripture translations refer to 'outcasts'. Such included those with leprosy, with 'demons', and women with menstrual issues. There were 'physicians' of the day who would try to help – we know this because of the woman with the bleeding who 'spent all her livelihood on physicians', and not been helped.

It is not surprising then, when Jesus's ministry to these and other conditions became known, he was much in demand. People sought him out, and on other occasions Jesus' compassion led him take the initiative to heal people of their condition. One example was the woman with the bent back as when Jesus approached her in the local synagogue. Thus Jesus exercised an extensive healing ministry. Writing in his gospel, Luke noted people came to hear Jesus 'and to be healed of their diseases, and those who were troubles with unclean spirits were cured. All in the crowd were trying to touch him, for power came out from him and healed all of them (Luke 5.18 – 19).

As we consider the gospel healings today we need to take into account the *uniqueness of Jesus' ministry*, complementary as it is to contemporary medical practice. In most situations of our need it is not either/or but rather 'both/and.' We may need medical help and we can benefit from prayer and ministry.

1) Restored to personhood

The *first* is a relational consideration, being *restored to personhood*. For this to happen there needs a change in culture in how society regards people with disability. Thankfully in our country it is changing and we don't refer to them as 'handicapped', and less so by their condition such as being deaf or blind. Surely it is preferable to refer to a person being hearing impaired. Yet that name-calling still continues overseas – I remember a time when ministering in the USA of drawing attention to their common use of 'handicapped' – as for example parking signs for handicapped drivers. And how this name attachment ostracises people. After the teaching, a woman came up to me with a with a real sense of gratitude and said she felt released by my drawing people's attention to something her culture took for granted. In our NZ culture this is relatively recent, as for example it was quite acceptable in the 1980's to refer to 'the handicapped' as it does in one of our NZ Prayer book liturgies. It wasn't all that long ago people readily accepted the 'Crippled Children's Society'. Now, one increasingly refers to 'a person with impaired hearing, or sight. Sadly that name calling or stereotyping still continues there as we have heard in the US presidential election debates.

May I draw attention to one aspect easily overlooked – this being an example from the gospel story of today, usually titled 'Jesus' healing 10 lepers'. Could it be preferable to refer to Jesus' healing of ten *men with* leprosy, or of the *woman* with the bleeding? People with a disability can feel so feel marginalised and with good reason. Hence there is the need to be sensitive to this, may I suggest when referring to gospel healings, and today. There's the sense as we do, that person is recognised in their personhood. Each is a unique human being.

Restored to community

Second there was a further uniqueness of Jesus' ministry in what he did as an aspect for people being healed. When considering Jesus' recorded healings in the gospels almost every one has evidence of the person being *restored to community*. Those with leprosy was a good example – from being marginalised in the culture of the day, in order to vouch for healing they needed to go the priests, and thus were restored into the community. Others also who were marginalised were restored – to their home-town, to their family, or to society. Think for a moment of Zaccheus, the despised tax collector restored to his faith as 'a son of Abraham'. And if Mary Magdalene was the one who was delivered of demons it was remarkable how she was restored to the early discipleship community and likely took a leading role.

How well do we incorporate those marginalised in today's society? One might think of those who have been in prison, or of psychiatric disability, or ones convicted of paedophilia. I would suggest – not easily. Yet they are ones Bishop Justin surely refers to as 'the last, the lost and the least'. I was so disappointed the Anchorage wasn't able to continue, as there was 'home' and fellowship for ones who come into the bishop's concern. Thus a breadth of healing includes those who are not easily at home in our present-day culture. The church community is somewhere they can experience acceptance, compassion, listening, and love.

Jesus' 'wholistic' healing

Thirdly, note Jesus' healing ministry was 'wholistic'. The ministry wasn't only a response to the symptom. 'Wholistic healing' is a 'mix' of physical, emotional, relational and spiritual. Those men with leprosy were so aware of their predicament, both physical and relational – being isolated from the community. Spiritual too and that was why Jesus instructed them to go to the priests. Thus they called out to Jesus from a distance to have mercy on them, inviting Jesus' response. They didn't get to say what they needed. It was after they started on their way they discovered they were cleansed of their condition.

This highlights a key emphasis of Jesus' healing as we come to him in our need. Its by way of taking a *faith-step* to ask and to trust. I remember in a previous parish when aware of a man about to go to hospital for a big operation. After the morning service I offered to pray for him. To my surprise he declined, saying, 'no thanks, I don't want to bother Jesus.' Jesus' invitation was and is, 'Come to me all who.... are heavy laden....' In coming, we take a faith step for the healing that Jesus has for us, or a loved one. I mentioned earlier, that despite their problems and their condition, those 10 men *acted in faith* based on Jesus' command. Furthermore in their need they called out to Jesus, pleading for mercy in their distress. There's a lesson here in our times of need. Yes it is right to cry out to Jesus in our time of distress.

It may be that *actions* are also needed as the 10 men did. What do we need to *do* to contribute to our own healing? I remember for example on tearing a leg muscle when running down the track from Colonial Knob. The doctor was a start but it was the referral to a physio and the exercises prescribed that enabled the healing.

Contemporary medical practice tends to focus on the presenting symptoms, and rightly. Yet in any condition there are related issues affecting us emotionally – anxiety and fear, for example. The symptom can also affect us spiritually – as in finding it difficult in being able to pray in the emotion-filled experience of a diagnosis. Relationally also, it affects our loved ones, and often their anxiety. That's why I refer to 'wholistic' healing of Jesus – in his responding to our need, and there's that 'mix' of healing aspects in our personhood. That's how we can regard the action of the 10th man when he discovered he'd been cleansed and returned to thank Jesus. Note Jesus' words to him, 'Go on your way, your faith has *made you whole*'. Some other cultures, including Maori, Hebrew and Celtic have an awareness of the 'wholeness' of healing. We can also realise it is present in our context.

Thankful anticipation

Fourthly, *thankfulness* in healing context. In the gospel story of today we are told of the one man who returned to thank Jesus. Indeed this is the only gospel healing account where this is recorded. However we ought not to focus too much on that, as in a number of other instances the person healed and the witnesses 'glorified God.' And that surely is tantamount to thanks, and indeed an appropriate response to our faith stepping out coming to God.

May I add a further aspect. Writing to the Philippians and aware of people's needs St Paul wrote: 'Do not worry about anything... 'in everything *with thanksgiving*, let your requests be made known to God..' He then shares the expected outcome - 'the peace of God which surpasses understanding, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus'. That's a profound assurance. The effect of thanksgiving along with praise is to present the need in God's overall sphere, and thus the song applies: 'Turn your eyes upon Jesus, ...and the things of earth will grow strangely dim in the light of his glory and grace.' In other words it gives a perspective and focuses on God's presence and less on the presenting symptom and we have a peace about it. Hence I describe it as *thankful anticipation* that God is indeed concerned, and we can expect that God will respond in God's way and God's time.

Jesus' unique healing

To summarise then, underlying Jesus' unique healing is mercy, compassion and love - then and now. Jesus' healing regards each person as being special, as he enters relationship with the person concerning their need. It has a unique healing quality in being multi-faceted. Jesus' healing then is 'wholistic'.

The invitation is to come to Jesus in all situations of need, prayerfully and thankfully anticipating how He will respond.