

Sermon

18/10//20

Acts 16:6-12a

Luke 10:1-9

[May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord our strength and our redeemer.]

“I wandered through each chartered street,
Near where the chartered Thames does flow,
A mark in every face I meet,
Marks of weakness, marks of woe.”

William Blake knew a thing or two about human suffering. But so do we all. All of us will have experienced or seen affliction at close hand: our bodies are so terribly fragile. Like a massively over-engineered German sports car we're made up of all these bits, that will break, or fall off, or stop working, through illness or accident or just age. Some of us know more about that than others; all of us know more than we want.

And it's not just our bodies that suffer, but our souls, our minds, our relationships – basically, *everything* can hurt. We are afflicted by mental illnesses, by abuse, by addictions, by damaged and damaging human relationships.

And the causes of such a lot of this suffering are not just individual bits of bad luck or poor judgement. You may have seen this guy:

His name is Isoa Kavakimotu, and he came to prominence recently responding to comments about obesity being a "lifestyle choice", and he

said this: "I blame NOBODY but myself for where I am today. ... I ate that bad food, drank the fizzies and added crazy sugar to my tea.

However, I am a product of my surroundings. I grew up surrounded by takeaways and liquor stores. When the dairy is selling fruit for \$1.50 per fruit, but pies at \$1 each, and I only have \$3 for lunch, ... guess what I am going to buy? How do you expect me to do 5+ a day when I barely had \$5 to buy myself some fruits at the shop? ... In the mid-20th century, the cuts of meat being sent to the Pacific were offcuts, preserved to last the long voyage. Our ancestors made do with the fatty meat and are paying for it with growing waistlines."

I remember myself, some time ago, being on a committee, pricing some kind of event I think, and hearing myself say "\$5 is nothing!" Before suddenly remembering how, for me, only a few years previously, \$5 had been the difference between being able to afford a prescription for antidepressants or not, when I had a family to feed.

If we're serious about wholeness we have to consider not just people's wellbeing as individuals, but the wider circumstances that shape their lives. The kinds of houses they live in. Whether they can afford houses at all. How many hours a week they need to work in order to keep their family afloat. The availability and expense of medical care. I'm sure you all took these considerations into account when you voted yesterday... Because healing and wholeness are not just about me, and God, and you. It's about the whole vast network of relationships we are all a part of. And one of the great things about the church is the fact that are not just individuals; that we can join together and make more than an individual response to these difficult, intractable problems. Hence the Wellington City Mission. Hence, the Stillwaters community, which I was part of setting up when I was at Central Baptist nearly thirty years ago. Hence, Te Puna Manawa, just up the road in Naenae.

Right near the start of his ministry, Jesus stood up in the Nazareth synagogue, and quoted Isaiah:

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,

because he has anointed me

to bring good news to the poor.

He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives

and recovery of sight to the blind,

to let the oppressed go free,

to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour."¹

When John the Baptist, imprisoned by Herod, was having doubts as to whether he'd picked the right guy, Jesus sends this report back: "The blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have good news brought to them."

When the Kingdom of God draws near, when God is present and active, one of the signs is that people are healed: people's bodies, people's minds, people's relationships.

But there's a bit of a problem, and the problem is this: Jesus in the gospels is basically a superhero. The disciples in Acts are basically superheroes. They pray and people are instantly, effortlessly, healed; demons depart howling; God clearly and unambiguously strikes down and raises up.

In in today's gospel reading, we heard Jesus send out the seventy disciples; later in the same chapter they return delirious with excitement: "Lord, in your name even the demons submit to us!"¹⁸ to which Jesus replies: 'I watched Satan fall from heaven like a flash of lightning.'¹⁹ See, I have given you authority to tread on snakes and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy; and nothing will hurt you. But how are we to map all

1 Luke 4:18-19

this onto *our* situation? Not, I think by playing with rattlesnakes? (though there are churches in the US that do... What do you reckon, Murray?)

Now it's possible that part of the problem is the kind of document that the Gospels are. They're basically a collection of Jesus' greatest hits; the most memorable things he said and did. There are no episodes like this:

"And yea, did Jesus then awaken from his sleep. And he did read the morning paper over a cup of coffee. And great was his merriment at the cartoons within. Then did he have a nice brunch with some close friends, watched a bit of Netflix, and at the ninth hour returned he to bed for a nap. This is the Gospel of Christ..." No, in the gospels Jesus has no ordinary days. Which makes it very hard, at this distance, to get a feeling for how his miracles and signs and wonders fitted in with the rest of his life and ministry.

Certainly, our experience of the activity of God looks a little different from this. What does a ministry of healing look like for people who *aren't* superheroes?

Today – October 18th – is the Feast of St Luke. All we really know about him is that he was a doctor, and a companion of St Paul. The third Gospel and the book of Acts are ascribed to him, according to a tradition that dates back to about a hundred years after they were probably written: could be true. If he did write them he was clearly a very well-educated and literate man. Weirdly, according to legends from the eighth century onwards, he was supposed to have been the first to paint an icon - a representation of Christ. From life. You can see a sixteenth-century Russian representation here:

Or if your taste is for something a little more ... flamboyant:

(You can tell it's realistic because of the modelling of the angels. That's not an ox that's just wandered in from outside, btw - the ox was a symbol of St Luke. For ... reasons.)

So, St Luke is the patron saint of doctors, of artists, of bachelors, of students, and of butchers. Presumably on account of the ox...

And today is a day we can celebrate the Order of St Luke. The International Order of St. Luke the Physician was founded in San Diego in 1932 to encourage and foster the use of healing prayer, and has been active in New Zealand since the 60s. In our own parish, Lynne-Stella Hassett, Murray Wills, Gill Berridge, Barbara Taylor, and Elaine McGavin have been involved in its work, and Derek Lightbourne has been the national chaplain, twice (it's his one mention in Wikipedia). So we want to honour the commitment these people have made.

But they're not the only ones in the parish involved in this kind of ministry. [At 10 am] As you receive communion, there will be people in the side chapel who are ready to pray with you about anything that troubles you. There is the St James Prayer Link, people who are willing to pray for you at a moment's notice. And then there's us; because we too will be joining in prayer for those who are suffering or troubled in a few minutes' time. For in our prayers, and in our actions, we can all become agents of healing.

There are two ways of thinking about this; both are present in the New Testament, and they're equally true and important so far as my experience goes.

One is a deep awareness that the healing agent here is *God*: "let go, and let God" - just get out of the way, and let God do God's thing. "It's no longer I that live," says St Paul, "but Christ who lives in me." "I do nothing on my own," even Jesus says, "but I speak these things as the Father instructed me."

But if the WiFi of God's healing presence is equally and evenly distributed throughout the universe, why does anyone need to pray for anyone else at all? Why can't God just heal us all directly? Need it be channelled through another? I don't really know, to be honest. But I do

know that we are not made to live for and by ourselves.

And so there is a sense that we can ourselves be a healing presence for others, just as they can for us. "In you, the Kingdom of God will have come near to those you encounter," Jesus tells the disciples as he sends them out. Our very physical presence can be a source of healing to others. But we need to be really present to the other. There's such a lot we may need to leave on one side: our busyness and our preoccupations; our judgements and ready-made opinions about their situation; the certainty that we know best; our spiritual ambitions for the other, or for ourselves. But if we can lay ourselves open to the other: who knows what God might be able to do?