

## **SERMON FOR ST LUKE'S DAY 2009**

**At the end of St Matthew's Gospel there is a wonderful commissioning of the disciples. Jesus has risen from the dead and is about to ascend into the heavens, watched by his loyal band of friends: *Go and make disciples of all the nations, baptising them in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the end of the age...* (Mt 28: 19,20)**

**Everything that he has commanded? Doesn't that therefore mean healing the sick, physically making people better, as he had repeatedly done – and indeed had empowered them to do too? On St Luke's Day, don't we want to celebrate in particular the wonderful healing power of Jesus as recorded in his account which, of all the Gospels, tracks Jesus' ability to heal – paralytics jumping off mats, blind men seeing, lepers restored to health – or the two beautifully touching stories that we read in today's Gospel including the woman restored to health after years of haemorrhaging?**

**If you have lived, or do live, with someone who is seriously ill, this is something that requires some serious thought. In my case, I lived with a sister who was born with a bent spine, someone who, like many in that post-war generation, contracted polio which led to a complicated form of asthma from which she was never quite free. Mary was never 'well'; she walked badly and eventually died at the age of 26.**

**Did we ever pray for her? She was nine years older than I was so I don't think it ever crossed our minds. She went to Church when she could, but it was not a time in the Church's life when praying for the sick was more than a formality. And then they had to be really sick – probably in another country!**

**But I do remember with great intensity the morning she died. It was a Sunday and I had been to Mass but she hadn't been well enough and was at home with my mother. I was walking home as usual when the local GP stopped his car and offered me a lift the few hundred yards back to our house. It was**

about as real as being offered a lift by a Martian. And in those few minutes he told me my sister had died of a heart attack.

Of course it was traumatic and dreadful, but the thing that had most upset and annoyed my mother had been the fact that the doctor had also been in Church and – without the advantage of mobile phones – had not been available when she had rung. *And then, she said with real pain in her voice, he had asked me if I wanted to pray with him? I can hear her now: I told him, no thank you!*

It wasn't just that Mary was now dead and it was too late, it was the fact that for my mother and, I suspect for most people, there was very little connection between medical science and praying to God for healing. Thank goodness hospitals and medical treatments are part and parcel of life: we expect our doctors to work wonders – miracles even – to help those who are ill, and we rejoice daily when they manage to save lives and to vastly improve the quality of life for millions more.

If we are going to pray, surely it is all about asking God to ensure that the skill of our medics when those we love are in their hands. Only when we know that someone has got past that stage, when they have a terminal illness for example, does our prayer turn a corner and we start to ask if, just maybe, something really extraordinary can happen.

And of course it does. People with almost no chance of survival do pull through. And we are then left with an even bigger question: were the doctors even better and more skilled than we thought – or has there been a real answer to prayer and it wasn't a medical cure at all but a spiritual one?

Like all of these big questions – and I guess there is hardly one that is more difficult – people of faith have to wrestle with the question behind the question. And one of those will always be, why does God seem to cure some and not others? And another will be, what kind of God are we placing all this trust in?

The women in the Gospels had got to that final stage. She had spent all she had on what passed for medical help and it had achieved nothing. She was shy and not a little embarrassed. But she had an inkling that this teacher had something of the divine about him and that he could do what the doctors could not do.

**Yet she was not able to just go up to him, especially not in front of a load of men, and ask for help. So she managed to mix with the crowd until she could touch the hem of his cloak.**

**Let's be sure what is happening here: she doesn't know if he can help and she hasn't the confidence to ask him outright. She just has a hunch and she takes a risk. The rest of the story is history. Jesus' divine power cures her instantly.**

**But what is really going on? What is God making of all this? Why is this story still told today?**

**We tell this story because (and here is the question behind the question) it is such a clear example of someone letting go of their own expectations. Her need was medical but it could have been anything – financial, emotional or social. What St Luke is pointing up is the way in which she is almost saying, *I either trust this man or I die*. I am putting everything into this one request to God. I am completely at his disposal.**

**And if I am at his disposal, he can say yes or no, and I will still trust him, and trust that he loves me.**

**It is the prayer of the broken, the barren, the one who has nothing more in their hands. And because of that total giving back to God, we find him restoring and making whole once more. Listen to the way Jesus leaves her: *Daughter, your faith has made you well. Go in peace*. Jesus does not say, *this was a lovely opportunity to show how powerful God is*. Instead, he focuses on the faith of a woman who had entrusted all she was to God, and had found her life restored.**

***But what if she hadn't been cured, you say? Would the story have still been included in the Gospel? I think the answer is that it would, because the focus is on the woman, not on Jesus. What we are being encouraged to copy is her total trust, even in the most awful of conditions.***

**And having got to that point, I then wondered why we had been given this passage from 2 Timothy as the other major reading for today? On the face of it, it seems an unlikely commentary on these two healing stories.**

**But then the penny began to drop. Here is the earliest voice in the New Testament Church, St Paul, reinforcing Jesus' blessing on the woman who was completely at her wits end. But this**

time, Paul is talking to the leaders of the small Christian churches that were springing up around the Med.

And they had been telling him that life was tough; the breakthrough in missionary terms was not quite as easy as they had first hoped; there was stiff resistance to the Gospel message and, worse still, there were a series of teachers all claiming that they were the authentic messengers of Jesus!

So, in this wonderfully pastoral Epistle, St Paul breaks with the tradition of the ancients – who advised speaking only when the time was right – by telling the fledgling leaders to go on saying what needed to be said *whether the time seemed right or not*. Quite simply he is telling them to leave the ‘timeliness’ to God and to go on preaching what they have had laid on their hearts by a God who knew better than they what needed to be said and when.

You can hear it as well as I: we have been given this passage because it too is pinpointing the theme of total trust and dependency again. Nothing worthwhile can happen unless we have laid aside our own demands and been willing to have nothing - in order to have everything that God can provide.

But that will take time, St Paul says, in a rather obvious commentary on their complaints: *life isn't easy!* They will have to put up with a great deal more hardship yet (St Paul isn't above pulling out the old ‘apostle in chains’ story when it suits him!) as they receive the leadership from him and ultimately from Christ Jesus himself. If he had had time he might have quoted Jesus in Gethsamane, *Father, let this cup pass from me, but not my will be your will be done...*

So have we answered the hard questions about healing? Not quite, at least not directly. But what we have done is to see that the healing of our bodies is really as nothing compared with the healing of our souls: unless we are willing to give God total control, we will miss the blessings in Isaiah's prophecy: *the wilderness will remain dry and the streams will not appear in the desert*. And all for the want of a little trust.