

Sunday 25th August 2019. Gospel Reading: Luke 13:10-17.

Title: Healing the Wounds of Fragmentation

In today's gospel reading we heard the story of the crippled woman who had been bent over for eighteen years. Jesus set her free from bondage and she was able to stand up straight.

Now I think it's reasonable to say that Christian healing is a controversial subject. Some vigorously embrace it, others dismiss it out of hand. But, before we can explore the notion of healing, I think it would be useful to learn about how sickness was often perceived in the culture of Jesus' time. The prevailing view in Jesus' world was that the sick person was tainted, that sickness signified a rift between God and the individual touched by sin. Furthermore, suffering and disease were often thought to be inflicted by God because of our transgressions against God's law. This is epitomised in the book of Deuteronomy where we're told that *'If you do not diligently observe all the words of this law...then the LORD will overwhelm both you and your offspring with severe and lasting afflictions and grievous and lasting maladies. He will bring back upon you all the diseases of Egypt...and they shall cling to you. Every other malady and affliction, even though not recorded in the book of this law, the LORD will inflict on you until you are destroyed.'*¹ Here, we see God punishing legalistic transgressions with sickness, disease and, ultimately, destruction. Even the

¹ Deuteronomy 28:58-61 (NRSV)

consolation that the story of Job offers seems like cold comfort in the face of a God that can act in such a callous way.

But, it seems to me that Jesus took a different view from this historical, Old Testament, understanding of God and illness. He seemed to innately understand the complexities of human psychology, and he understood that sickness cannot be dismissed with simplistic notions of sin and punishment from God. He seemed to instinctively appreciate the psychology of illness and the interplay of mind, body and spirit. For Jesus, those who were sick needed understanding and compassion, not judgement and punishment.

Nevertheless, Jesus' healings are, of course, still classified as miracles, events not subject to rational, natural or scientific explanation. So how are we to respond to the healing miracles? Jeffrey John, currently the Dean of St Albans, suggests that our approach to them often falls into one of two opposing categories; either literalist or reductionist. The literalist takes them at face value, assumes they must be literally true, and that they happened exactly as recorded. At the opposite end of the spectrum, the reductionist seeks to reduce, or explain away, the miracles, to understand them in this-worldly terms. Although seemingly very different, both of these approaches focus on the event, on what did, or did not, happen. John goes on to suggest that this dichotomy misses the point and that we should be exploring what he calls 'the inside meaning'. To emphasise this deeper approach, which has the capacity to reveal dimensions of meaning not previously considered, he quotes Saint Augustine who says...

*'let us ask the miracles themselves what they tell us about Christ, for they have a tongue of their own, if it can only be understood...The miracle which we admire on the outside also has something inside which must be understood. If we see a piece of beautiful handwriting, we are not satisfied simply to note that the letters are formed evenly, equally and elegantly; we also want to know the meaning the letters convey. In the same way a miracle is not like a picture, merely something to look at and admire, and to be left at that. It is much more like a piece of writing which we must learn to read and understand.'*²

I wonder whether we have been so conditioned by the literalist understanding of miracles, that the word healing has connotations today that can be distracting. When we talk of healing, many equate it with cure and expect Christian healing to result, sometimes instantaneously, in the cure of illness or disease. But the Anglican priest and author Jim Cotter wrote, in a way that echoes the words of Augustine, that *'the healings of Jesus were symbols, parables of much more than cure, indicators of the way God wills life to be.'*³ Jesus demonstrated through his life and practice that God's world is a world in which healing flows, but how are we to understand healing, and does today's gospel reading hold a clue?

We're told that Jesus intended the women to be 'set free from bondage'⁴. From a healing perspective, what does that mean? Does it mean she was cured? Does it

² Augustine, 'On the Gospel of John', Tractate 24:2. As quoted in: John, J (2004) *The Meaning in the Miracles*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., p. 4.

³ Cotter, J. (1990) *Healing – More or Less*. Sheffield: Cairns Publications, p.7.

⁴ Luke 13:16 (NRSV)

mean she was miraculously returned to a previous physical state? Or, might it mean something deeper, something more profound? Might it mean she was liberated from the psychological burden of captivity in which she lived her life so that she could, for the first time, stand up straight, released from the burdens society placed upon her? It may be helpful here to consider the other word that is frequently associated with healing, and that's wholeness. Martin Israel, pathologist, Anglican priest, and author, wrote that '*wholeness does not consist in removing a present source of travail; it demands a complete transformation of the person's attitude to life, which in turn is an outward sign of a transfigured personality*'⁵. So, might healing and wholeness be something more akin to release, reconciliation and peace? I believe we diminish healing if we think of it only as the cure of illness or disease, a perspective that has the potential to offer misplaced hope and expectation. But this does not mean that healing cannot take place, it simply means we have to expand our understanding of what healing means. Healing and wholeness is a process, a process that leads to transformation and what Paul, in his letter to the Galatians, calls 'new creation'⁶.

Now I'm aware that this may sound rather mysterious and unattainable. How are we transformed? How do we become a new creation? Well, like most things in life that are worth doing, it does need time and effort. It is an ongoing process, a journey, but a journey that is open to everyone. It is a journey of prayer and spiritual practice, a journey that embraces the deep healing properties of silence. But it is also a journey of listening and dialogue; of personal adaptation and self-adjustment; of support and communal Christian fellowship. It is a journey of faith, hope, trust and love. Satish Kumar, the onetime Jain monk, recalls the Indian philosopher Krishnamurti telling

⁵ Israel, M (1981) *The Pain That Heals: The Place of Suffering in the Growth of the Person*. Oxford: A. R. Mowbray & Co. Ltd., p171.

⁶ Galatians 6:15 (REB)

him that 'for healing to take place, we have to go beyond theories, formulas, and ready-made answers' and engage with a process that heals 'the wounds of fragmentation'⁷. If we are serious about embracing a healing ministry, we must move beyond the common stereotype of healing as inexplicable and miraculous cure. We must acknowledge that whilst healing is most definitely God's work, it is also the individuals work, the physicians work, the families work, the work of the Christian friend and the Christian community. To fully engage with God's healing work, we must strive to become a healing community, a community that facilitates transformation and new creation, a community that heals the wounds of fragmentation.

Amen.

⁷ Kumar, S (2002) You Are Therefore I Am: A Declaration of Dependence. Totnes, Devon: Green Books, p.91.