

Sermon for Sunday 21 August 2022 – The Tenth Sunday after Trinity

Pete Postle, Reader

Isaiah 58.9b–14; Hebrews 12.18–29; Luke 13.10–17

May all I say and think be always acceptable in thy eyes, my Lord, my rock, and my redeemer, Sit please. The Gospels, of course, record many of Jesus's miracles. The majority are faith healings, exorcisms, resurrections, and control over nature. But today, as you can see on our reading, we focus on the first faith healings.

There is something almost magical and beautifully simple about the way that Jesus goes about healing people. He sees someone in need or suffering and simply puts it right. Did he always heal sick people brought to his attention, or was he selective? The biblical evidence, with only one exception I can think of, is that he always healed, and he sent his disciples out to spread the gospel and to heal - 70 of them. They returned to him and report in delight; they found they could heal, they could drive out evil spirits. It became an assumption that disciples of Christ may be chosen by God to do such deeds. But somewhere across the centuries, the healing ministry fades from sight, and the church goes about its business in a more mundane, law-driven fashion. Now and then, the church finds someone who has been given the gift of healing. It's a special occasion and time for celebration, perhaps the sanctification of the gifted individual.

Not until recently, by which I mean the 19th and 20th centuries, do we find the revival of a more general ministry of healing. Many of our Anglican churches up and down the land now hold healing services - come next week to ours. We used to have regular such services down in the south towns in Devon when I lived there, with services alternating between two of our churches in our extended benefice. But with the death of my friend Benny Goodman, those services lost their appeal, because Benny was the one who possessed those healing powers for such fortunate people. Over coffee, I'll tell you more about Benny Goodman; his name is actually Jack Goodman, and he was a veteran of the Second World War, where he had 78 bombing missions; and forget any ideas you might have of a St John in a white dress - he was just a lovable rogue.

One such person, though, who benefited from Benny's ministrations is me. When we came down to live in the south in 1994, I suffered from back spasms that completely disabled me. That first summer, Benny laid hands on me at the altar in Sherford church, and I felt a huge warmth through my back. Silently, I said, prayed if you prefer, to God, 'If this works, God, it will be a turn up for the book. I'll owe you more of my time. Now, sorry if you think I should have been more reverential talking to my maker, but I don't think God would have been impressed by anything more flowery from me, because he knows I don't talk or think that way.

No matter. I was healed, over a period of time with recurrences now and then, but healed. And I did give God more of my time by becoming a churchwarden and then, after dithering for about two years, by

training to become a Reader. So you can blame Benny Goodman for that; now since by no means everyone was cured by Benny, or any other healer, that set me thinking, why me? Why not some of the poor souls that I saw at the healing services? And what exactly was the nature of my healing? I have long since decided that it was a revival of my faith that was healed. The physical effects were almost incidental and could be explained, at least partially, by my adopting a far more active lifestyle in Devon - I was converting a barn, largely with my own hands.

I do not believe for one moment that God picked me to be healed and not others, because that would tell of a capricious God who picks and chooses who he rewards and punishes - more Old Testament than new. No, it is both simpler than that, and far more complex. Firstly the simple bit - Benny had healing powers, but not, of course, of the supreme effectiveness of Jesus's powers, because he, Benny, like all of us, was a long way short of the perfection that was Jesus.

Jesus's powers were a measure of his closeness, his oneness with his Father in Heaven, just as his teachings, his words, were the authentic voice of God. So, Benny's healing successes were always going to be intermittent. Or were they? Here comes the complex bit. Here in the church, we tend to claim that one's prayers are always answered, but more often or not in an unexpected way. But I know devoted Christians who lost their faith because they've come to the eventual conclusion that that claim is untrue. They have prayed and prayed for physical or spiritual healing, for relatives, for friends, for children, not for themselves. And they cannot discern. Yet anything has happened. So we are into that most vexed of Christian problems the problem of suffering.

Christians have no complete answer. Other faiths think they have found one by allowing the existence of a second divine being, a God of evil. Or by declaring that all material things are intrinsically evil, and that our life is a battle against that evil. Christianity refutes both ideas. There is only one God and he gave us a world of beauty to enjoy. So how did evil creep in? Why didn't God stop it? Why didn't he always respond to our prayers? Why didn't he just wipe away every tear in the eye?

Let's remind ourselves that God is good, God is love. God's will, therefore, is something more full of wonder than we can possibly imagine. Something worth spending a lot of time seeking and then enjoying. The will of God is always positive, always inspiring, and always leads to what is right and good. Now, on many occasions, we can't fathom out that good. It may be a long way down the road of life. For example, my back spasms seven years before I returned to God, when I was at work in Lewes and then up at that altar in Sherford - if I'd had the wit to listen to him earlier, I could have shortened those years of pain. Those years of suffering were because of my blindness, not God's will.

But the question remains; were the pains initiated by God to help me find life's true direction? Perhaps your time of suffering can be thought of similarly as an occasion when you have wounds, physical or spiritual, that need to be healed, wounds to be treated and cared for. In fighting them, you'll come through fitter and stronger, more aware of God's purpose for you. But what if they are the sort that won't heal? In that case, is suffering part of the will of God?

I can't give you an answer, but Julian of Norwich had a very appealing vision of this subject. There was in her vision a servant whose whole pleasure was doing his master's will. In his rush to carry out an errand that his master had requested of him, he fell into a dreadful chasm of hurt, pain and suffering, which took him the rest of his life to climb out of. When he eventually succeeded, the master could only welcome his returning servant with love and open arms, because his misfortunes had been solely the result of his eagerness to serve him, God. Lovely idea, isn't it? But if you think that suffering is God's will, you will believe that he built the chasm. Or if he didn't, who did? If you believe your suffering is not God's will, why did he not lift his servant out of the chasm and save him the pain?

We're trying here, of course, to define God's purpose for the world as part of that huge jigsaw, we are trying to replace the insignificant peace that is called Satan, called Satan by Jesus. The solitary piece of the jigsaw that spells evil. Irresistibly, we must accept the fact of a force of evil, a force that we humans must face up to and face down. And in that fight, we always have the full backing of God.

I'd refer you to the Old Testament book of Job, one of the oldest books in our Bible. Job put it this way - 'Lo, but these are the outskirts of his ways. And how small a whisper do we hear of Him, but the thunder of his power, who can understand?' And God replies, 'Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth? On what were its bases sunk? Or who laid its cornerstone when the morning stars sang together and all in heaven shouted for joy?' To which Job responds, 'What reply can I give thee, I who carry no weight? I put my finger to my lips. I have spoken once and now will not answer again. Twice I have spoken and I will do so no more.'

Nor shall I. Amen.