

EXPLORING CHRISTIAN FAITH

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THE MINISTRY OF HEALING

by

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THE MINISTRY OF HEALING

What is healing? What is our Christian heritage of healing? Healing is defined as restoration to wholeness, for individuals, for communities, for nations. So many of the healing miracles of which we read are followed by movement “Take up your bed and walk” etc. Healing is life giving – mobilisation occurs; new destinations are prioritised, new opportunities can be explored. Healing – whether it be manifested physically, emotionally or spiritually is liberation of the parts bound by disease, i.e., relationships which are becoming destructive, dislocated spiritual life etc. Fr. Francis McNutt put it this way: “Jesus came to save persons not just souls. He came to help the suffering in whatever way they were suffering. Sickness of the body was but a part of the bindings he had come to destroy.”

THE BIBLICAL BASIS OF THE HEALING MINISTRY

What then is our heritage to it? For Christians healing is rooted in the **Old Testament**. The Hebrews pictured the world as good. There was a unity of mind and body created by God. Health and holiness were related. Healing (restoration to wholeness) and salvation (spiritual healing of the soul) are linked in as much as they both involve restoration to dynamic wholeness in body, mind, spirit, society and the world, and derive from being in proper relation to God. The Book of Job, that great cry of pain and protest (and haven't we all been there?) looks at an earlier Hebrew view that illness and affliction are divine punishments, but it balances that understanding with the proposition that disease comes not from God – but from an evil agency. Rather than reflecting on a broken relationship with God, bodily and emotional affliction can overtake the faithful and the end result may be spiritual growth – new understanding of Yahweh – whether or not physical healing actually occurs. That was the state of play in the Old Testament. A beginning of movement away from the notion that ill health indicated a broken relationship with God and was God inflicted - to a new understanding that God wills wholeness and brokenness springs from another source.

What about healing in the **New Testament**? It portrays Jesus as vitally concerned with healing the physical, moral and mental diseases of people and commanding his followers to do the same. The New Testament regards healing as an indication of the presence of the Kingdom of God in which restoration of bodily wholeness, emotional well-being and mental functioning take place in the context of ones relationship to God. Jesus and his disciples reinforced the later Old Testament understanding that disease was NOT divine punishment for personal or corporate sin. No doubt about it, sin can cause disease, but it is NOT God causing disease as punishment for sinfulness. Jesus' method of healing was based on faith and desire for wholeness, and he linked these with the healing power of God who hates evil in all forms. As in the Old Testament salvation and health were intrinsically

linked, both recognised as blessings from God who opposes sin and evil. God's desire is wholeness, but we have the freedom and power to deny wholeness: for example - moral bankruptcy can lead to disease; a sense of right and wrong is cauterized and wrong actions and thoughts invade. Crime related incidents (explain O.C. murder) everyone DISeased; disunity reigning – victim, perpetrator, carers, relatives. Reckless driving can men a wheelchair at young age. Self-inflicted harm happens; drugs. Alcohol etc.

But what about those who have inherited ill health through no fault of their own? The child born with a crippling hereditary disease, the person confined to life in a wheelchair etc., how do we comprehend that? With anger? - yes, with sense of bewilderment for sure, regretfully. What we do recognise is the frailty which is an unavoidable part of the complexity called life – a bewildering array and arrangement of complex biological cellular structure. Things do go wrong, links in the biological chain are broken. But this is not new, these things were around 2000 years earlier. In the healing work of Jesus he himself becomes a sign of God's presence in the midst of disease, death and despair. God is near, and in that nearness is our health and wholeness. "Nearer my God to Thee, nearer to Thee". The sacrament of healing is a two-way exchange - it is relationship. We place ourselves in a position of recognising the need for God's healing grace to bring us true wholeness, mend our dislocation and heal us. God is waiting for our invitation to touch our deepest hurting places, the places known to no one but God and ourselves. "Nearer my God to Thee..." we turning toward and advancing to God, God, in infinite love and graciousness coming near to us, anointing us with wholeness and peace.

IN THE EARLY CHURCH a central place was given to the ministry of healing; anointing was commonplace. A human being was seen as a unity of body, mind and spirit. During the 4th century the emphasis began to change; unity was lost, the body came to be viewed as less important than the spirit. Illness was increasingly regarded as divine chastisement and discipline. A rather Gnostic understanding crept in which viewed the spirit and material world in opposition.

THE LATE MIDDLE AGES pursued the idea of disease as divine punishment and healing as having nothing much to do with healing of the soul – or as we refer to it 'salvation'. However, during this arid time the healing ministry was still purveyed by monastic communities who were 'outside the system', monastic healers and hospitallers continued. But by the Council of Trent in 1551 there was no longer room in the church's understanding for a rite of healing. A time of great tension followed which benefited no one. The institutional church so firmly regarded the needs of the body to be in conflict with those of the spirit that it

attempted to control the development and practice of medicine! Unbelievable when looked at with 20th century understanding. Priests were required to attend patients before physicians, if a doctor ignored or disobeyed this rule he was severely disciplined by the church. Makes the NHS seem Utopian!.

SINCE THE REFORMATION western culture has witnessed a radical reversal of the total emphasis upon the spiritual healing of the soul; largely due to the thinking of Descartes and Newton there developed an emphasis on the health of the body and the natural physical processes of living. It all went a bit far though, mind, body and soul were understood as isolated entities. Until fairly recently 'holistic' was a relatively unknown concept. A disease or disruption of the body was confined to the part concerned; no assumption that there is a connection between all physical parts, and indeed between the body and its social and physical environment. The result was a situation where it would not have entered the physicians mind to consider the emotions, the spiritual context or the environmental situation of any patient, they dealt with the physical. Polarisation: physicians versus ministers and psychologists. Body in isolation from soul and emotions.

OUR CONTEMPORARY UNDERSTANDING is more Hebraic – a return to unity, thank God. There has been a new comprehension of holistic: mind, body, soul interrelated. One affects the other, they belong together. A recapturing of some of the Jewish and early Christian views about the unity of body, emotions, spirit, society in the process of disease and healing: to paraphrase, 'that which God created to be related must not be put asunder'. Disunity is brokenness, this brokenness presents in very recognisable ways: identity crisis 'who am I', dislocation of relationships, depression, fear of growing old and vulnerable, sense of meaninglessness and the rapidly increasing incidents of psychological distress resulting from loneliness and isolation. Nationally and globally the brokenness is recognized in oppression, lack of education and jobs, selfish greedy use of earth's resources, injustice. The World Council of Churches stated that the religious call today is to share, to be a healing presence where it is needed, whether between cultures, races, generations, women and men, races and religions or oneself and one's family. Healing has once more, as in its biblical roots, become connected with salvation; healing of all our 'bits' springing from being in proper relation to God. Shalom: wholeness – being at peace with self, God and neighbour. Healing has once again to do with transformation: transforming the personal and social fabric of life.

The sacramental of anointing for healing is opportunity for the healing power of God to work in a transforming manner in all aspects of our being. Nothing to do

with what I call ‘ZAP’ healing, ‘a little zap will have you flying to the moon tomorrow’. This sensationalist stuff is focused entirely on the physical – a return to disunity. It denies ‘holism’ – unity of body, spirit, emotions and society. It thereby denies our Christian heritage rooted in the Old and New Testaments. Healing involves liberation from whatever binds our freedom. Healing means a new relation to God, oneself, to neighbour, just the way God intends things to be. Healing applied to ourselves can mean overcoming crippling dependencies, release from destructive emotions, finding a sense of purpose and direction, being reconciled to limitations, freed to embrace aspirations, coming out of meaningless (I don’t count) and isolation and reconnecting as participating and valued member of the human race. Healing in relation to neighbours might mean prevalent ‘me first’ attitude is diminished and compassion and empathy increased. Personal anxiety, fear and hostility are laid to rest and a spirit of neighbourly cooperation and collaboration result. It goes on and on, when shalom is present – harmony reigns.

God wants us to be truly healed in all our parts, God longs for it. God waits to anoint us with healing in the deepest and most hurting places of our being, the places where we bleed and weep unseen. The ministry of healing is our heritage, God given from earliest times. I am delighted that back rubs are fashionable once more, but even more thankful that this wonderful means of grace has been thoroughly reclaimed.

(From a sermon preached at St. Andrews, Romford in October 2001)