

Sermon 21 October 2018

James 5:13-16 and Luke 10:1-9

August Bank Holiday 2017 was memorable for a number of reasons. I was at Greenbelt, as usual, and for the first time in many years, not only did it not rain but it was HOT! I went to some amazing talks many of which received standing ovations. And on Sunday morning, the communion service was led by an array of people with many differences. The really memorable thing for me was the sermon, given by a 14 year old girl called Becky, who has cerebral palsy. I've included the link to the You Tube clip of it: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J7raDY8TVwQ>. But you can just google Greenbelt Communion 2017 and you'll find it. Becky can't speak, she uses a computer voice simulator, she jokes that it's the same that Stephen Hawking uses, but hers is nicer, much nicer, and she's right. She says that she used to think that because she can't do a lot, that God loves her less. But since finding a verse in the book of Daniel she has learned that that God does understand about her difficulties. Until then she thought there was nothing in the Bible for those in wheelchairs, but Daniel 7:9 declares that 'the throne was fiery flames and its wheels were burning fire'. A heavenly wheelchair! She might be broken, but she is also whole.

There is currently an exhibition in Southmead Hospital, on the main corridor, opposite Gate 30 which is the gate for the Chaplaincy, called How are You Healing? It's the result of a study by Exeter University Medical School, looking at what is healing? It declares that 'healing is wholeness, wholeness of body, mind and soul. Many of us become broken in some way during our lives. What can we do when that happens? How can we find a new pathway to wholeness and travel our own healing journey? While we have the capacity to heal ourselves from some kinds of brokenness, sometimes we need help and this often comes from connecting to something outside ourselves, from other people or from nature, the arts or spiritual belief. Healing journeys are not just about us as isolated individuals, they can be about relationships, families, groups, outdoor spaces and the whole world'. That's a statement from a group of medical professionals.

The exhibition is in the form of banners, which I've photographed and have a few to show you this morning. The first says: 'We thought we could cure everything, but it turns out we can only cure a small amount of human suffering. The rest needs to be healed'. The rest needs to be healed'.

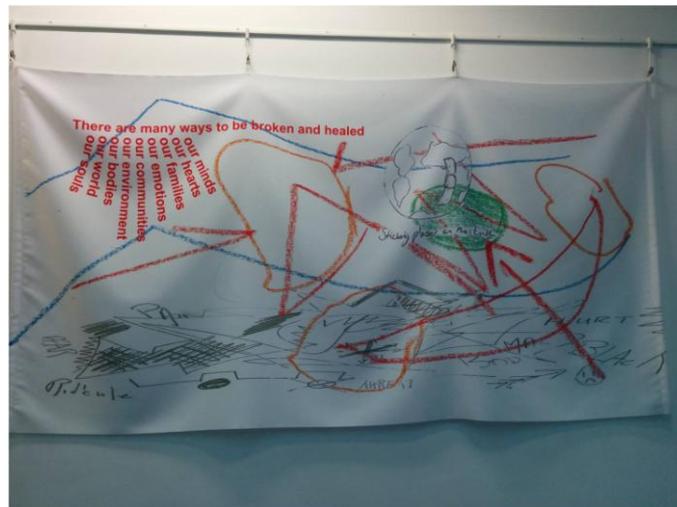


This begins to open up a difference between a medical cure and healing.

Because this talk is being given in the context of a Christian service, I'm going to focus on healing from God. But because God is creator, because God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, is in relationship with us, healing from God can, must, include also healing that comes from other people and from the world around us.

So many of us consider that God loves us less than others, that others are better than us. We may have made mistakes that we think we can't be forgiven for. Or we have been wounded, physically or psychologically in ways that make us anxious or angry or unable to trust others. Or we have an illness or sickness for which there doesn't seem to be a cure. Or we are afraid, for ourselves or for others.

The second banner I want to show you says: There are many ways to be broken and healed: our minds, our hearts, our families, our emotions, our communities, our environment, our bodies, our world and our souls. It shows a jagged series of shapes and the words scribbled include pain, ridicule, fear, threat, hurt, sad and sticking plaster on the world. All of us will experience one form or other of the brokenness identified on this second banner.



In the letter of James, we are asked, are any of you suffering? I think that he would have included all of those forms of brokenness as being suffering whether it is about pain in the body, or the pain and grief of bereavement or a broken heart, or of loneliness. Pain will come to most, if not all, of us. And none of us knows the pain borne by another.

James seems to distinguish suffering from sickness. But the answer to each is 'prayer'. Jesus warns us in John's gospel, (9:2-3) to be careful about equating suffering and sickness with sin, but James recognises that seeking forgiveness will be a form of healing. James recommends that those who are sick, and I would add those who are suffering, should ask the elders to pray over them. James encourages us to pray for one another, that we might be healed.

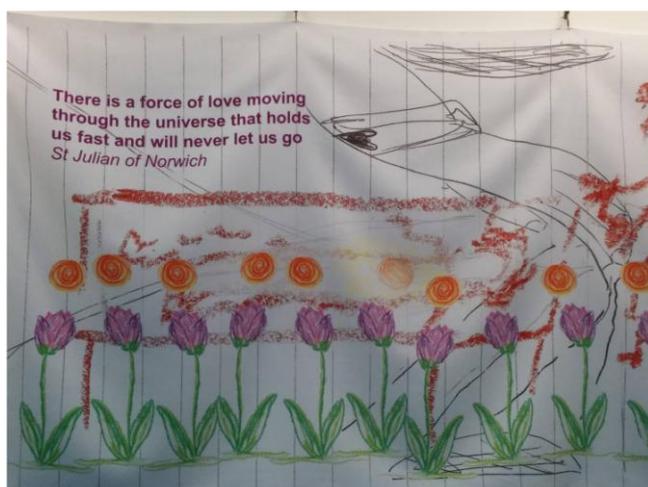
What are the examples of healing we see in the Bible? We see Jesus making a blind man see, a lame man walking, a woman made clean by curing her menstrual discharge. We hear of many people being healed of unnamed illnesses. We hear Jesus telling people not to be afraid. We see how the power of the Holy Spirit gave petrified followers of Jesus both courage and words to speak when they had none. We learn that Jesus spoke in the synagogue and proclaimed that the words of the prophet Isaiah had been fulfilled in him. That the Spirit of the Lord had sent him to proclaim release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free. Release, sight and freedom can be read literally and metaphorically. We can all be

captive, unseeing and oppressed, or be the captors, blind to others suffering, and oppressors. Release from those things is a healing too.

All those things still exist today. We don't see so many of those miraculous, direct healings that seem to defy medical reason. They do exist, they do happen, there will be people here who can testify to that and we rejoice when that happens. But more often it seems we have to live with pain, with brokenness. And the healing we receive is often more like a lifting of our anxiety, our worry, our fear.

Paul, in his letter to the Romans (5:3-5) says '[We have peace with God] and not only that, we celebrate in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces patience, and patience produces character and character hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit'. Paul doesn't say that we celebrate suffering. These words have brought comfort and hope to many as they face each new difficult day. We can pray for patience. We can pray for hope. When we pray we stand with one foot in the place of sickness, of sadness, and the other in the place of forgiveness, of healing and of hope.

The final banner I want to show you is a quotation from St Julian of Norwich. She says: There is a force of love moving through the universe that holds us fast and will never let us go. We believe that love is the love of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. There is a story that St John was asked why he only wrote about love, he replied because at the bottom of it all, that is all there is, there isn't anything else, only love. We were created by God in love, to be loved and to love in return.



In this church, we have a healing team who have been trained and commissioned for the role of laying on of hands for healing. The commissioning takes place each year at the same time that the PCC and Pastoral Teams are commissioned, during a 9.45 service following the ACM. This healing team equates to the elders referred to in James' letter. They might not be ordained, but they are given authority, in the same way that in our gospel reading from Luke, that Jesus sent out 70 people, in pairs, expecting that they will heal the sick. He didn't do it all himself. We know that Jesus went through Galilee teaching in the synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing every disease and sickness among the people. Matthew's gospel tells us that he told his followers to do the same (Matthew 4:23).

The most common forms of healing ministry are:

- Public and private prayers asking for God to act
- Laying on of hands and anointing
- Reconciliation and forgiveness

- Friendship, forgiveness, listening, acceptance and affirmation

At St Peters we offer regular opportunities to receive prayer and laying on of hands for healing within our services.

We invite people to come for this during the Communion service at 9.45am on the third Sunday each month, so there will be the opportunity this morning. When those offering the ministry of the laying on of hands have taken their places in the south west corner of the church, simply go to them. You do not have to say anything. They will say this prayer for you and/or for those you are concerned for, as they lay their hands on your head or shoulder: 'In the name of God and trusting in his might alone, receive Christ's healing touch to make you whole. May Christ bring you, (and those for whom you pray) wholeness of body, mind and spirit, deliver you from every evil and give you His peace'.

We also offer this ministry of laying on of hands for healing during the Thursday morning Communion Service on the first Thursday each month.

We are considering whether it will be appropriate to offer anointing in the context of healing prayer.

We include the names of those who are in particular need in our intercessions at Morning Prayer, the Communion service on Thursday and during the services on Sundays. We invite you to add names to the book on the altar in the Lady Chapel, having first obtained consent from the individual.

Through this healing ministry, we believe that Jesus will meet anyone who comes for prayer, at their point of need and that every form of suffering can be helped in some way.

To finish with words from Psalm 103, but I would encourage you to read the entire psalm:

'Bless the Lord, O my soul

And all that is within me bless his holy name,

Bless the Lord, O my soul

And do not forget his benefits

Who forgives all your iniquity,

Who heals all your diseases

Who redeems your life from the Pit,

Who crowns you with steadfast love and mercy

Who satisfies you with good as long as you live'

Amen

Sarah Thomas

21 October 2018