

Healing and wholeness in the hands of the Lord

A sermon preached by Revd Viv Bridges on Easter 4, 12 May 2019 in St Peter's Wolvercote

Refs: Acts 9 36-43; Revelation 7. 9-17; John 10.22-30

At some time in our lives, all of us will experience times of sickness, ill health. However much we may pray about what is wrong with us, there will be times when prayer isn't enough by itself, we need to seek medical advice and help. In this country, and especially in this city, the medical care we need will be available and there will be a good chance that the illness will be cured. So we shall experience one of the many ways in which God works through human beings. Surgeons, nurses, carers and so on ... are God's hands, eyes, feet, voices.

Recently I watched *Surgeons at the edge of life*, a rather gruesome television programme which showed complicated operations in detail. One of the surgeons commented: 'We (surgeons) do the operating but healing is in the hands of the Lord above.' What a very humble surgeon! He acknowledged that healing was not just a matter of operations, procedures, medicines. Something else had to be present for true healing and wholeness.

We all know of people for whom appropriate medical treatment cured the illness but wasn't enough for them to be healed. There must be something in the mind, in the heart, and surely in the soul for true healing to occur. Sometimes what's in the heart, mind and soul is enough.

We also know of cases in which healing has occurred without the need for medical intervention even when this would have seemed impossible. Such reports are often treated with great scepticism, especially those coming from someone we suspect is a charlatan. But real gifts of healing have been reported from time immemorial. We read of Old Testament prophets healing the sick even, on rare occasions, bringing the dead back to life. Described in the New Testament, the disciples did many acts of healing. We heard today in our reading of Peter restoring Tabitha to life.

All religions, creeds, societies, seem to have had healers among them, men and women who have the special gift for curing illness. This continues today. Although most people are sceptical about reports of miraculous cures, we in the Church of England affirm our belief in God's ability to heal in our ministry of laying-on of hands for healing.

I must confess to being one of those who tend to doubt reports of broken limbs or heart conditions being healed instantaneously. I acknowledge that this doubt is inconsistent with my having faith that a man died and rose again from the dead! If I believe that God could enable someone to come alive again, why should I doubt that he can mend things "just like that". But, like so many people, I have that nagging doubt. Still, I have no doubt at all of God's ability to heal through the Holy Spirit, often working through doctors, nurses and carers, and often in our minds and hearts and souls.

There are many apparently physical conditions that can be healed by treating the mind. Stress, anxiety and guilt can cause quite devastating physical and mental symptoms, so anything that can calm and relieve the mind may also have healing physical effects.

Healing can, of course, take forms other than physical cures. Finding the courage to accept and live with some physical conditions can bring real healing.

Healing is often necessary for things that are not physical. I remember going to a service of Laying-on of Hands at the Church of the Holy Family in Blackbird Leys when I was training. I had no physical illness but went up to receive laying on of hands. The words that were used then were, as we usually use now:

"In the name of God, and trusting in his might alone, receive Christ's healing touch to make you whole, May Christ bring you wholeness of body mind and spirit, deliver you from evil and bring you his peace."

That phrase '*deliver you from evil*' had a quite extraordinary effect on me. We were going through a very difficult time and in that moment, kneeling in the church, two things seemed to happen. I realised that evil was involved in the problem, at the same time as I understood that God would deliver us from it. Totally unexpectedly I felt a weight lifted that I perhaps didn't realise I was carrying. It was a miracle.

Healing can happen in many different, often amazing, ways and the Church recognises the different aspects that affect wholeness. Here's an extract from the introduction to the Wholeness and Healing service found in the *Pastoral Services* book:

"The receiving of forgiveness and the act of forgiving others may open the way to healing and wholeness. Prayer for healing and strengthening should not involve the rejection of the skills and activity of medicine which are also part of God's faithfulness to creation. Prayer for healing needs to take seriously the way in which individual sickness and vulnerability are often the result of injustice and social oppression. Equally importantly, such prayer should not imply that the restoration of physical wholeness is the only way in which Christ meets human need. "

So it offers the ministry of Reconciliation in which Confessions are heard and absolution given in the name of Christ. It recognises that wholeness is affected by the conditions that we live in. Many millions of people around the world live without shelter, clothing, enough food, or they live in fear of cruelty and violence. For most people this must be dealt with before they will feel whole, and so the work of those who try to bring relief, including the many Aid Agencies, is vital. This week we give thanks for the work of Christian Aid, and all it does to try to bring healing to so many people.

The church also recognises that wholeness involves far more than just physical health. Having comfortable living conditions and perfect physical health does not ensure feeling whole. On the other hand, we know that many people who live in appalling living conditions can also have a deep sense of wholeness, and we know that some people who have poor physical health also have that same wholeness. So the Church offers its ministry of Laying-on of hands and anointing for healing. For many years St Peter's has offered this at the evening communion service on the first Wednesday each the month. We are now encouraged to extend this to every Sunday after the 10.00am service. After the service, all who would like to receive laying-on of hands are invited to sit in the Chancel. The Minister will invite people one by one to kneel or stand by the altar rail as the minister gives the familiar short prayer while laying on hands and will ask if you would like to be anointed. If you're asking for healing for someone else, simply mention their name to the minister.

This isn't a moment for a long conversation about problems. You are always extremely welcome to fix a time with any minister for such a talk which many find to be extremely valuable. It's worthwhile reminding us that this is the ministry of the Church - Christ's body here on earth - not the individual priest's ministry.

We hope this will mean more of you will be able to take advantage of this important ministry. If you'd like to talk a bit more about it, or about the ministry of Reconciliation, ask a member of the Ministry team.

We give thanks that God offers us healing in the many different aspects that affect us - physical, mental and spiritual, through the Holy Spirit working in our hearts and souls, through many men and women in the medical and caring professions, through those who love and support us, and through Christ's body, the Church.

Amen