

**SERMON FOR ORDINARY SUNDAY 13B  
Birkenhead 2018**

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I sometimes hear people say “I have lived too long”. There are others who say “their life was too short. What then, is the right time to die? Is there a right time? We seem to be born with this strange desire to live forever, providing we are healthy. Medical research keeps looking for cures which will enable long life. On the other hand we also know we are going to die. There lies our torment. We have a desire to live forever but a knowledge that we will die.

So it is that we find ourselves looking to the medical profession to cure all our diseases. We have an expectation that Doctors will cure us no matter how bad our disease. We keep expecting medical research to come up with new ways of healing us.

The church is sometimes put in a similar position. God is still expected to cure people every time we ask. Especially is God to cure those the doctors have failed to help. Some movements within the church would have us believe that the main sign of God’s activity among us is Gods ability to cure the sick. Of course the more miraculous the cure appears the better the cure will be. After all, isn’t that what Jesus did in his lifetime.

In the popular mind the Church, like the medical profession, must be able to heal, for healing has become a major preoccupation of our society. One can’t help but wonder if in fact the preoccupation with healing might be caused by a fear of death. Healing may be seen as preventing death. We still long for that day when we might live forever with good health and well being. Death will be no more, neither sorrow nor pain.

3

The two stories in today's gospel are about fear of death and about the need for healing from that fear.

The synagogue official was afraid his daughter would die. He said to Jesus "Come and lay your hands on her to make her better and save her life". Not only was he afraid his daughter would die, he was also a man of faith who trusted in Jesus power to give life. This man was a respected pillar of the community and would expect a rabbi like Jesus to respond to his request.

The woman with the haemorrhage however was unclean. She would not have been able to go to the synagogue to fulfill her religious obligations.

Being unclean also meant she would not generally be seen in public. Total rejection would have been her lot. She had spent all she had on long and painful treatment which didn't cure her. She was getting worse. Of course she was dying. Blood is the sign of life, and if one loses ones blood, one loses ones life. Death was the only option - until she heard of Jesus.

4

Now women were not allowed to speak to men in public. Still less would an unclean woman speak to a man. So she determined that if she just touched his clothes it would be enough to heal her. And in the throng of people pushing and shoving around Jesus she got close enough to touch his cloak. And she felt in herself that she was cured. And Jesus felt power go out of him. So she had to reveal herself, her condition, and her belief in a cure to Jesus in front of all the people.

Mark, in his gospel, has a habit of inserting one story into the middle of another. It's as if he wants to emphasise the point he is making. The point here is of course about having life and not being afraid of death. So the story of Jairus's daughter continues and she too is given new life. And she gets up and walks about and eats as though nothing had happened to her.

5

We can only assume that later on both these people died. But the story here is to ensure we get the message about not being afraid of death when Jesus is present.

It is clear that in the case of both Jairus and the woman, they had faith that Jesus could work. Faith is about these two people placing their trust in God. Their relationship with God had remained

strong even though the events of life were challenging them.

In these stories it's very clear that these people were made whole by their faith. In other healing stories Jesus shows that wholeness is not just the curing of physical disability. Jesus shows time and again the need to deal with the whole person. That's why the woman with the haemorrhage had to be exposed. She may have gone away without acknowledging what had actually happened. It was the whole person, not just the physical that needed healing. Wholeness is about the way we respond to God.

6

Today we tend to see healing, both that of the medical profession and that done by the church, as simply the removal of physical disease. One has only to see the advertising about all the things we can take for healthy bodies. We are bombarded with

information about foods and potions which will make our bodies fitter and healthier than they have ever been before.

Yes we do need to rejoice over good health. We also need to be aware that good health is not for ever. Wholeness is for ever and that supersedes health.

No amount of medicine, no amount of prayer, can change the physical or mental disability of some people. We have to learn to live with some of these imperfections of life. Life is not perfect and part of our difficulty is in coming to terms with life's imperfections. That's what happened to St Paul. He wrote in a letter, "I prayed and prayed that God would remove the sharp pain from my body, and he didn't."

7

Surely one would imagine if anyone deserved to be healed it was St Paul, a man who spent so

much of his life in God's service. It appears that Paul had some recurring illness which troubled him from time to time. Although he asked God three times to remove this pain, God didn't. God's reply was, "My grace is all you need." Doesn't seem a very satisfactory answer does it? There doesn't seem much comfort in that. Yet that's what Paul is proud of, not a physical healing but the gift of God's grace to enable him to carry on with his work in spite of or because of this illness.

Jesus too had a similar attitude. Healing is not simply the removal of physical disease. Often Jesus seeks other kinds of healing as well as physical healing. His teaching is clear that sometimes forgiveness brings healing, sometimes the giving away of possessions brings healing, sometimes a change of lifestyle brings healing. The healing sought brings wholeness because we are in right relationship with God and with other people.

It was not the primary purpose of Jesus to remove the inconvenience of suffering from the world. Jesus shows the removal of the things that are wrong with the world will come about as the by product of his main purpose. His main purpose is to show that the way of love is the way of God, and that we are to love as he loves us. That love was expressed in his own willingness to suffer and die. In the crucifixion Jesus was dealing with the cause of life's imperfections not the symptoms. There are some diseases which doctors deal with and they can deal with the cause. With other diseases they are only able to treat symptoms. Jesus was not simply dealing with the symptoms of disease in humanity, but with the cause of our disease. Jesus says the cause of our problems lies in our distorted attitudes to life and to God. It's this attitude that Jesus deals with, the cause, not just the symptom.

There is in our society and in our Church a great deal of dis-ease. Broken relationships are so obvious. I think we keep tinkering with the symptoms of them, and we fail to look at the cause.

I know the problem of healing our dis-ease is not simple, but I do believe that as well as dealing with the symptoms we also have to deal with the cause. How we become a more loving society is really the question.

We need to keep asking how we can develop more loving communities, how we can assist people to express their needs, how we can foster

loving relationships between people? If we can keep doing that then I believe we really begin to tackle some of the health problems of our communities. Health is such a wide issue, and it often gets sidetracked into being a debate about more hospital funding.

10

But there are some basic needs of our society which need to be dealt with first, The cause not the symptoms require attention.

I believe really it comes back to what the gospel reveals to us about Jesus. It's about building healthy communities where people are able to relate to one another and to God. Knowing we are loved and cared for by others and by God will also help to alleviate our fear of death. We are mortal. We die. But we do not die without hope. The resurrection of Jesus is our surety of new life

through death. Out of this comes true healing and wholeness

Healing and faith, not being afraid of death, these are the themes of our gospel. They are to do with bringing hope to people because of what Jesus has already done for us. Here in this Eucharist we thank God for giving us that hope of new life, both here and now and also when we die. In God lies our faith, our healing, and our eternal life.