

Suffering and Healing

St. Brandon's

2 Kings 5:1-15c; Luke 17:11-19

13th October 2019

Two weekends ago, at the end of September, I went to visit my mum in Newbury. On the train down to London we were approaching Peterborough station when this kind of happened:

“Change here for March” said the voice.

And the choice – skipping Winter – was tempting,

Avoiding the darkening

Of time and soul and spirit.

Change here for March. But other things are lost –

Crystal skies on icy mornings,

And time for roots to stretch themselves

Downwards, deep, divining.

Change here for March? But March will come

And with it the lightening and enlightening

That perhaps needs the darkening and the deep divining

To be valid. Then, let wintering be done.

Now I'm not often given to poetry – and you can probably see why! But I relate this partly because what there is to say from our OT and Gospel readings this morning is so straightforward that I felt I needed to pack the sermon out a bit; this could be a very brief sermon. The common pattern to the two readings is that there is illness (Naaman's leprosy and that of the ten lepers); they each seek healing (from Elisha the man of God and Jesus Himself); they are healed; and then the moral at the end is that you really ought to say thank you as Naaman, but only one of the lepers, do. Illness, petition or prayer, healing, thanks. It's as simple as that. And it works every time.

The Epistle of James in the NT summarises most of this pattern: 'Are any among you sick? They should call for the elders of the church and have them pray over them, anointing them with oil in the name of the Lord. The prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up' (5:14-15). OK, it doesn't have the 'thanks' bit at the end, but otherwise the pattern is the same: illness, petition or prayer, healing. It's as simple as that. And it works every time.

By way of application, the closest we have to elders of the church is probably our Shared Ministry Development Team (SMDT). So if you're ill, call them, and I'm sure they'll come and pray and anoint you with oil, and you will be healed – oh, and remember then to say thank you. It's as simple as that. And it will work every time. End of sermon. Amen.

... Ah but ... Try telling Nick and Anna that, as they grieve the recent death of Nick's nephew Josh, aged 26 from a random insect bite. Illness, yes; prayer, yes lots of it; healing, no; thankfulness, little chance. It doesn't work every time. It's not as simple as that. That's not to say that there isn't some truth in the pattern of illness, prayer, healing, thanks, it does work some of the time, but it's clearly not the only way things work, it's clearly not as simple as that.

I said this *could* be a very brief sermon this morning – I didn't say it *would* be a very brief sermon! Suffering in general, physical illness in particular, and healing are not lightweight topics. And there are no easy answers, as we all know. But let's at least explore it, in so far as we can in what's left of a sermon.

First, illness or suffering in general whether it be physical, mental, emotional, spiritual or quite likely some combination of these. The readings seem to take it for granted that that's just how things are – neither Naaman nor the lepers seem to question either the apparent injustice or the randomness of suffering. Why suffering in the first place? Why me, or you, or Josh? I think I'm with the nine lepers not the one who goes back to Jesus to give thanks. Why give thanks when it shouldn't have happened in the first place, when the healing was only putting things back to where they were before the illness, putting things back perhaps to how they should be?

There is a strand of thought in Christian literature that suggests that suffering is sent by God for our benefit. Brother Lawrence in *The Practice of the Presence of God* puts it like this:

Find consolation in him who keeps you nailed to the cross. He will free you from it when he thinks it is right. Happy are they who suffer for him. Grow accustomed thus to suffer. Ask him for strength to suffer all that he wills, and for as long as he shall judge it needful for you. The world does not comprehend these truths, and I am not surprised. They suffer as worldlings do, and not as Christians. They regard sicknesses as Nature's afflictions, and not as demonstrations of God's grace, and that is why they only find there that which is hostile and rough in Nature. But those who look upon them as coming from the hand of God, as the results of his mercy, and as the means which he uses for their salvation, commonly find in them great happiness and real consolation.¹

Can we 'buy' this? That God sends suffering deliberately for our good? That if we are suffering, it's because God has caused it rather than 'Nature'? Well, again, there may, in some circumstances, be some truth in this, and I want to come back particularly to the second part about the good that suffering might bring about. But generally, I think we're on safer ground in recognising that illness and suffering just are. That they are in the nature of things, they are just a fact of life. We might still want to question why God designed the world that way, why the randomness, why the injustice. We might well want to cry out to God against it, against Him. Those are entirely reasonable questions and complaints. And it might only be of some comfort to know that God shares in our suffering, that God in Christ bore our humanity with all its suffering, its randomness and injustice. That God is a God of compassion who suffers with His creation. Yes to all that, but that may not be easy to accept or help much in the particular situation I or you are facing. And we might also take some comfort in the promise that in the new heaven and new earth 'death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more' (Rev. 21:4). Yes again, though again that may not help much in the particular situation I or you are facing.

But what about healing? Again, we can question the apparent randomness and injustice of it. Some are healed, and in many cases it's probably just through the help of the medical profession or counsellors; prayer may or may not have made an obvious contribution. In some cases, and despite prayer, some are not healed – Josh, for example.

¹ Brother Lawrence, *The Practice of the Presence of God*, Hodder & Stoughton, 1981, p. 42.

But then we need to ask a deeper question: what sort of healing? Naaman had leprosy and he was healed physically. But quite a lot else was going on. Naaman was a powerful man familiar with deciding the fate of others – the Jewish slave girl, for example. He used his position and the wealth that went with it to make demands, to get his own way. But Elisha, the man of God, would not play along with that. He sent a messenger rather than attending to Naaman in person. He didn't accept the present that was offered at the end of our reading. Naaman ended up healed, but also humbled; 'Naaman came and stood before [Elisha]' – no longer any power-play going on here. And Naaman came to faith: 'Now I know that there is no God in all the earth except in Israel'. Naaman's healing was much more than physical. Perhaps we might be able to say that through Naaman's physical illness, he was healed not only physically but also mentally, emotionally and spiritually. God was doing a lot more in his life than he had bargained for.

And similarly for the one leper who returned to give thanks in our Gospel reading. He and the others had a physical condition and they were all healed from that. But the one 'when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice. He prostrated himself at Jesus' feet and thanked him.' And Jesus said to him, 'Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well.' There was more than physical healing going on here. The leper, a Samaritan, an outsider, entered a journey of faith in the living God. God was doing a lot more in his life than he had bargained for.

Rowan Williams, in his study of the healing miracles in Mark's gospel, shows how each of them takes place in the context of relationship.² In other words, it's not just about the healing of whatever the obvious symptom the individual presents with, it's also about entering into a relationship with Jesus in which healing on many other different levels might take place. Now that doesn't quite work with the nine lepers here in Luke's gospel who are healed but without, apparently, entering into relationship. But perhaps what we can take from this is that while God is unlikely to cause or will our suffering, He is certainly able to use it for our greater good, and is always looking to heal us on more than one level. Indeed, as with Naaman perhaps, the illness or the suffering is the only way God can get through to those other levels.

Now goodness knows how that may have worked out for Josh, or is working out for his parents, or for Nick and Anna and the other close family and friends. Much related to illness, suffering and healing will remain mysterious, and may well challenge our faith. But perhaps we can hold on to God's compassion, His suffering with us, His deep desire for our greatest good in what we might call times of wintering in our lives, even when what's going on makes little or no sense either at the time or even afterwards. And perhaps we might be able to accept the winterings as leading to healing on other levels.

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Downwards, deep, divining.

² Rowan Williams, *Meeting God in Mark*, SPCK, 2014. See also Alison Moore, *The Puzzle of Pastoral Care*, Kevin Mayhew, 2019 which has an excellent chapter on healing and suffering.

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Amen