

Canon Ray Nichols 15th August, 2010 St Mary's, Iffley

PRAYER FOR HEALING

On 9/11 Barbara and I were on holiday at St David's. When the Twin Towers were attacked there was a huge outpouring of love and prayer in that little Welsh cathedral town. We heard that all over the country people were praying. Very large numbers of people. People who normally don't pray. Many found it rather strange to be doing so. As we hear the stories of great suffering, pain and sorrow in Pakistan and China, people pray for the injured, the dying and the stricken families.

Some years ago there was a press report of an article in the Lancet. You may have seen the two hour-long programmes on television. It concerned the Cancer Care Centre in Bristol. Newspapers described the battle between conventional medicine and the kind of complementary treatment offered by Bristol as *"A silly war that leaves the patient all too often bleeding on the battleground."* Either or' judgements about different approaches to healing are foolish and unnecessary – as Prince Charles made clear when he opened the Bristol Centre some years ago.

When we retired to Dorset 22 years ago, we became Macmillan volunteers. I remember a patient with cancer in a nearby village, whom I visited every week. He was 49, a director of his company, had a delightful wife and two fine children. His main worry had been leaving **them**. When I first began to visit him, he'd been through the whole conventional gamut of cancer treatment, surgery, radiology, chemo-therapy. He was battered and beaten, very down and depressed. But he was also angry. Told by his consultant "There's nothing more that we can do for you", he said, "How dare they write me off like that – I'm going to fight this thing and get well again". When he'd got his strength up he went off to the Bristol Care Centre and came back a different person – not cured – but having regained his dignity. He said to me "It's **my** life, **my** body, and I now feel I'm in control, no matter what the cancer does to me". He went from strength to strength, began to get out, drive his car, think about sailing his boat again and even began to look for a part-time job. Soon after that he was told that the cancer was growing rapidly. He began to get pain in his back, felt weak and took to his bed. A few weeks later I took his funeral. It makes one think that as Christians we ought to understand more about what healing really is.

Here in Iffley we are taking the question seriously.

Amongst Christians (as with anybody else) you will find a variety of views. On the one extreme there are those who would deny any connection between healing and religion. Sickness, they say, is entirely a physical matter and religion is irrelevant. On the other extreme (and less common) are those who believe that health is **entirely** a spiritual matter.

The Christian Scientist believes that pain and sickness are simply due to wrong spiritual attitudes. Pain is not therefore a true reality. To deny the reality of human pain and sickness is false religion and just plain silly.

“There was a young lady of Deal
Who said ‘Though pain isn’t real,
When I sit on a pin and it punctures my skin
I dislike what I fancy I feel’”.

More common, but no less dangerous, is the view that if you pray hard enough sickness will always be healed. One further wrong idea is that people can be “Healers”. (Never trust anybody who calls themselves “a faith healer”.) Healing is the activity of the Creator alone – though He uses many sorts of people to be the channels of His healing, including the NHS. I have often witnessed God at work in the JR.

So let me try, all too briefly, to say something of what we have learnt about the Christian attitude to sickness and healing.

First, Prayer and faith must never be narrowly and rigidly linked to **physical** healing. We must never allow people to believe that if they pray, physical healing will always follow. The bitterness and disillusionment which results when physical healing does **not** follow can be devastating, and often cause the abandonment of any religious beliefs. Prayer must always be for what the New Testament refers to as ‘wholeness’ (from which the word healing comes) Jesus was never preoccupied with physical healing (it was almost incidental).

Confronted on one occasion with a paralysed man, Jesus said “Take heart, your sins are forgiven”. The lawyers scoffed – called it blasphemy. The man must have thought ‘It’s very nice to have my sins forgiven, thank you, but what about my paralysis?’ Jesus said “Which do you think is easier? To say – your sins are forgiven, or to heal the patient? To show you how God sees it – I’ll do both – Stand up and walk”. Jesus makes people **whole**. As part of that wholeness, physical healing often comes, but God wants to make us **whole** – **spiritually** healthy, not just physically well again. Our prayer for the sick must be that they may experience the **wholeness** of God’s purpose for them.

Have you ever known someone, perhaps with cancer, maybe crippled, bed-ridden, in constant pain – who nevertheless radiates life and goodness to those around. They’re more **whole** than many of us dashing around enjoying so called “good health”.

Secondly, that leads me to say something about spiritual approaches to healing, the Hospice Movement and the sort of work that places like Bristol Centre do and the medical profession’s increasing interest in ‘alternative therapy’.

We are coming to understand that man is a 'whole' being – an **integrated** whole. Not separate departments of body, mind and spirit, each of which can be treated separately and distinctly by the appropriate expert. We now realise that unresolved guilt, anger, envy, anxiety, bitterness, frustration, lack of purpose or meaning in life – all these things, and many others have a distinct and very real effect on physical condition. So there are many instances of physical healing resulting after an experience of forgiveness or reconciliation; the resolving of a much-cherished bitterness or the overcoming of a long-standing frustration. When we come to experience wholeness of life – loving God and rejoicing in His love for us – the context of physical well-being is radically changed.

Thirdly, we must be careful not to go from there to conclude that sickness, whatever form it takes, is the result of sin. Jesus went out of his way to make this clear. Frank Short, a London fireman went to put a fire out in a small terraced house. As he opened the door of the front room an oxy-acetylene cylinder exploded. He was burnt from head to foot. Nose, lips, ears, fingers just melted in the heat.

As an ordinand in training I visited him every week in the famous burns unit of East Grinstead Hospital. He'd already had 33 operations – there were many more to come. He would scream in pain as the nurses lowered him into a saline bath. Knowing I was training for the priesthood, we talked one day about God. He said that he'd had no time for God before the accident. He couldn't possibly go running to Him now. He had no right to ask for God's help. I said nothing is further from the truth and pointed to a picture of his son on his bedside table. "Supposing," I said, "he had gone away in a huff and you hadn't seen or heard from him for years. Then one day you hear that he wanted to come home to his family. What would you do?" I had no need to say more. Ten years later, when we were in Africa, I got a cutting from a London newspaper. Frank had finally been discharged and with his compensation had bought a house near the hospital gate. He spent his days visiting, where I had visited him.

God's love is not arbitrary or conditional. He acts before us – not in response to us. If we learn to love Him, it's because He first loved us. "*Whilst we were yet sinners Christ died for us*". When we pray for the sick, we must pray for the **whole** person. Physical healing may, or may not, result. The healing of conscience and the removal of guilt can often facilitate it – but Jesus made it abundantly clear, and the Christian Church has always taught, that pain and sickness are not punishment. That said, of course, if you deliberately misuse the physical, psychological and spiritual gifts of God, you can only expect to reap the natural consequences.

So, **finally**, we bring our sick and troubled into the healing presence of God. We believe that He welcomes and cares for them. We are content to leave them in His hands – not anxious or striving, but knowing that we are all His children. We come **from** Him, we are never left alone **by** Him, and we find our true destiny – **wholeness** – **only in Him**.

The touch of Jesus has still its ancient power. We bring His suffering world to His feet and ask Him to *“Say the word only, and we shall be healed”*.