

SERMON – TRINITY 18 – SUNDAY 30th SEPTEMBER 2018

James 5:13-end

Mark 9:38-end

Some years ago I had a phone call from our local hospital chaplain asking if I would be able to take a funeral for him. He was about to go on holiday and in all likelihood one of the patients he was ministering to would die while he was away. The patient came from overseas, so the only local parish he had was where he lived and worked as a night security guard at a business premises. That happened to be one of our parishes, hence the call to me.

The patient, who I'll call Ryan, was in his mid-thirties and he had bowel cancer. I'll return to his situation in a little while.

Our reading today from the Letter of James tells us in no uncertain terms that, as people of faith, we should pray for others when they are sick – and, when we are sick ourselves, we should seek that ministry out and ask for prayers to be offered for us. And it tells us that we should expect God to heal us.

Yet, for many of us, that is really difficult, indeed very challenging. Sometimes it even feels as though believing Jesus died for us and rose again from the dead is easier to do than having faith that God can heal someone with a terminal illness. I wonder why that should be?

I think there are several reasons.

Firstly, we live in a world vastly different from that of James. In his day medical practice was rudimentary and people were more in the habit of believing in miracles than we are. Back then, if someone recovered from an illness, there wasn't any other explanation. But we are children of the Enlightenment and we live in times when revolutionary new medical techniques are constantly evolving. Just consider – it was only in the First World War that they discovered how to do blood transfusions, but that is taken for granted now. Today gene therapy is used for some conditions and we are even anticipating individual genetic profiling to become the norm.

The lens through which we view illness is one of medicine rather than miracles. And if the miraculous does happen, straightaway we want to understand the medical reason for it so that we can try and replicate the cure for other patients. It makes us very sceptical if we can't find a rational, scientific explanation for why someone recovers.

Secondly, we have developed a mind-set that suggests that God doesn't heal people very often. In part that's a misplaced view – we attribute the majority of cures to the medics rather than to God, so he only gets credit for the few healings we admit we can't explain another way. But as more of us live long enough to develop cancer, dementia and so on, our cumulative experience (in ourselves or in those we know) seems to be more frequently one of illness than that of recovery. And yet, being logical, that's inevitable – we all have to die of something.

Thirdly, when we are looking for evidence of God's healing, I wonder if we're looking in the right place, or whether we're asking for the right thing.

My training minister used to pray for people to be healed 'at their point of need'. Some of the congregation members thought that was very irritating and rather meaningless. But actually I think he was on to something. For some people, their point of need is not so much to do with their illness but far more to do with healing other problems in their lives – broken family relationships, deep regrets or whatever. Very often when physical recovery doesn't happen, it is only much later – years on, in fact - that we can ascertain that healing did take place – it just wasn't where we were looking for it. Jesus promises that when we pray in faith God answers – but sometimes that answer isn't delivered in the way or in the timescales we have in mind! But as Christians we have to believe the answer comes.

And that brings me back to Ryan. Some days after the hospital chaplain phoned, the inevitable second call came in from his colleague. Ryan had died and we needed to arrange the funeral. His parents had come to the UK and had been staying with friends in the last weeks of his life, so I went to see them.

They told me about a lad who was brought up in a churchgoing home but, as many of us do, had drifted away from church as an adult. His work as a night security guard meant that he had few friends in this country – his shift patterns didn't allow it – and he had tended to comfort-eat until he had a very considerable weight problem. He had become more and more reclusive. And then there had been the bombshell about the bowel cancer which, it turned out, was the same rare type that had killed a close relative a few years earlier – it was a genetic disposition they shared, and nothing to do with his sedentary lifestyle.

Yet in the handful of weeks before his death, things had changed. Inevitably Ryan had lost a lot of weight and his appearance had returned to that of the slim young man they had remembered. As he slimmed down, his confidence increased and he came out of his shell. They had brought him an iPad in hospital and he had been contacting his friends abroad with that – and those friends had taken the opportunity to tell him how much fun he was and how much he meant to them. He had enjoyed hearing all of that and feeling he was truly loved. He had been anointed with oil before his surgery and, as time went on and the end became inevitable, he chose to reaffirm his baptismal vows with the hospital chaplain.

His final two days were spent watching a cricket match at the ground near the hospital, enjoying a family picnic. And then, just as they were all hoping he might even be well enough to return to his native country, he drifted away in his sleep.

The funeral was, as you can imagine, a sad occasion – and yet it was also filled with hope. In my homily I suggested that the transformation we believe will happen when we meet God face to face was already evident while Ryan was dying. He was blossoming in front of his parents' eyes, even as they were all preparing for him to be taken away.

When someone is ill we focus on asking for restoration, but sometimes what is offered is transformation. Restoration implies reverting to something we know and recognise. Transformation is about embracing a future of new flourishing and hope. Healing can be either or both. Of course we should pray for physical healing for people and we should rejoice when it happens. But we should also be on the look-out for other signs of God at work.

And that brings me on to talking a little bit about the prayer ministry we offer here on a Sunday morning.

Prayers for healing sometimes have a bad press. Many of us will have heard horror stories about people being told they are not recovering from illness because they're not praying hard enough. That attitude speaks to me of a vindictiveness that I, for one, cannot associate with God who makes himself known in the loving person of Jesus.

Another misconception is that prayers for healing are not very Anglican. I can only imagine that's because it's not very British to admit we need help from anybody else, and that sensibility has crept into the Church of England – somehow it's 'not quite nice' to ask for someone to pray over you.

We need to be careful that neither attitude inadvertently puts a stumbling-block in the path of those who do need us to pray for them – and, facing facts, we will all need it sometimes.

Jesus encourages us to pray in his name and in the power of the Holy Spirit. And that is what our prayer ministry team members do. They also offer anointing, as James advocates, using the oil for healing which the Bishop blesses at the Chrism Eucharist on Maundy Thursday each year.

We have a team of about a dozen from this congregation who work in pairs to cover nearly every Sunday. They also work with the Diocesan Healing Team to offer prayer ministry at the Chrism, Ordination and LLM licensing services throughout the year. The Reverend David James kindly coordinates the rota and the team reports back through me to the Dean and Chapter. I am very grateful to them for their commitment and their dedication to what they do, and I know they are passionate about making sure it's a ministry which is offered to everyone.

So where do the rest of us come in?

Firstly, of course, you are always very welcome to go up for prayer ministry for yourself or for someone you know who needs God's help. Sometimes people feel reticent because they are afraid that everyone else will notice them going up and will start to chatter about what the problem might be. But I urge you, be of good courage! If you need it, go up anyway.

So that's the second point – we all need to respect each other's privacy and guard against speculating when it's really not our business. There is a big difference between kindly concern and gossip.

Thirdly, I am reminded that, in the tenth chapter of Luke's Gospel, Jesus sent the seventy disciples out in pairs to minister in his name. What's unspoken in that episode is that there must have been many more followers than just those seventy – and the role of the rest was to pray for the ones who had been sent out.

Our prayer ministry team members have a particular calling to pray for healing. Like any spiritual gift, it's a vocation given to some but not to all. But the rest of us have a responsibility to pray for our team, for their wisdom, compassion and their protection, as they offer that ministry on our behalf. So I encourage you to encourage them in what they do and above all to pray for them as they carry out Christ's work in that particular way.