

## **Forgiveness and the Faith of Friends**

*(Christian Healing, Sermon one: Rev. Alan Stewart, Sunday 22 September)*

Real, actual insurance claims, Volume 3:

‘Going to work at 7.00am this morning, I drove out of my drive and straight into a bus. The bus was five minutes early.’

‘Coming home, I drove into the wrong house and collided with a tree I don’t have.’

And, ‘The accident was caused by waving to the man I hit last week.’

We can only begin to guess at the insurance claim filed by the homeowner in today’s story, where a group of friendly vandals demolish a roof in search of a divine osteopath!

Joking aside, we all know, I hope, that there are no divine insurance policies in life; no ‘get-out-of-accidents/-suffering/-disease etc -free’ cards. I wish there was.

Today is the first in our series of sermons on Christian healing or, more accurately and more helpfully, perhaps; Christian wholeness.

I’m up first and I want to begin by recognising that this is, for some of us, a difficult and emotive and mysterious subject. So, from the start, I want to put two important cards on the table. The first; I believe God heals, and the second; healing is not always the same as cure.

That second one’s important. When faced with the worst, of course, we all pray for a cure; that’s natural; who wouldn’t? And some of us, perhaps, have experience of witnessing a cure or remission which defies medicine and,

seemingly, comes in response to our prayers. I don't want to take anything away from that but, equally, I'm aware that the vast majority of the time, that doesn't happen. And to attribute that cure or that remission solely to God throws up, for some of us, a world of pain and disappointment and questions, not least, 'Why for one and not for another?'

So, I want to leave 'cure' in a box marked 'mystery', but I do want to say one other very important thing – whatever is happening, I believe it has nothing to do with one person's faith being stronger than another's.

Healing is not necessarily the same as cure. Healing involves the whole person – the territories of mind, body, spirit, memory. And, controversially perhaps, I want to say that actually I believe God *always* heals. It may not always be in this lifetime. It may only come, in fact, in the next or the hour of our dying. And, it is entirely possible to die healed. And very soon we hope to put on an evening called 'A Good Death', facilitated by a hospice chaplain, to help us explore what that might mean for us. So, watch this space.

It's essential when we look at any of the healing miracles in the Gospels to first try to understand them in their context; what was the culture of the time and, also, what was the agenda, the main teaching point of the writer? You know, those arguments that try to prove or deny the miraculous in these stories actually both miss the point. Because the real question, actually, isn't, 'Did this really happen?'; the real question the writers want us to ask is, 'What does this miracle tell us about the nature and identity of Jesus?'

We need to remember that the context of these miracles is a culture of religious purity; that is, a culture which dictated who's in and who's out; who's pure, who's not; who's acceptable to God and who isn't. And it is precisely the evil of this purity culture that Jesus rails against so often and so often targets in his healings. We only have to look at the kinds of people he healed; many of them

fall into that 'impure' category – people with mental health problems, non-Jews (or Gentiles), a haemorrhaging woman; all outsiders. And what's beautiful is that so often Jesus breaks these taboos through touching these 'untouchables', restoring not only physical health, but, more significantly, healing social exclusion and the heartbreak it causes.

Back to the paralysed man hanging from the improvised skylight. There are two things I want to draw out from this story [Mark 2. 1-12]. The first is the healing power of forgiveness and the second the faith of friends.

Now, if you were Jesus and a paralysed man on a mat had gate-crashed your tea party, after the initial surprise at the rudeness, the first thing you'd probably have done was the obvious; the 'get up and walk' speech. But, before that, Jesus says something surprising, he says, 'Your sins are forgiven'. Now, that's odd, because the man hadn't actually asked for forgiveness. So, why did Jesus do that? Well, two reasons, I think. The first is, going back to that question, 'What does this tell us about the nature and identity of Jesus?' - shock, horror, by claiming to forgive sins, Jesus is actually making himself equal with God... that's not only first-degree blasphemy; that's just lunacy. And that's actually the main point of the story.

The second reason is that, perhaps instinctively, Jesus knew that this man was not only paralysed physically but also paralysed by guilt or shame about something in his past. Maybe he had done something, or many things, he regretted, or maybe he'd swallowed the popular and toxic theology of the day which blamed ill-health on sin, often the sin of a parent.

And, in that moment of knowing himself forgiven, perhaps the man received a healing more powerful than just new-found mobility.

In his book 'The Meaning in the Miracles', Jeffrey John writes, 'We are psychosomatic creatures, and our state of mind and spirit affects our physical well-being often more than we know. Most GPs will testify that the majority of patients they see are not so much physically ill as loaded down with intolerable burdens of guilt, depression, anxiety, loneliness or self-hatred'. He goes on to say, 'A doctor once admitted to me how much he wished he could exercise a power of absolution in the surgery, and lamented the fact that the Church is so ineffective in deploying this desperately needed ministry for the common good'.

Those of us who have been on the receiving end of forgiveness, of absolution, will know its power to unlock us from prisons of guilt and self-hatred. Confession, as the old adage goes, is indeed very good for the soul.

Sometimes, of course, the hardest thing is to forgive ourselves and sometimes we just need someone to say, 'Don't be so hard on yourself, you're only human, it doesn't make you a bad person'. Sometimes we need to learn how to be kinder to ourselves; sometimes we just need the kindness of God channelled through the kindness of a friend.

And it's the friends in our story today who are the real heroes. They gave their time, their energy, their faith; risked the wrath of the homeowner, and the possibility that their friend would be disappointed. And Jesus congratulates them on their faith. A word here about faith. Faith seems to be important in healing, but it's not about mustering enough, it's simply an openness, a trusting; a faith that opens a channel for God's grace. And perhaps you've had moments in your life when you couldn't pray and someone else did the praying for you; moments when you struggled to trust, and someone else trusted enough to channel that grace. I have. And it's meant everything.

The power of forgiveness and the faith of friends. Both, of course, are not just the reserve of the ordained or licenced few; we are all called to be part of this, to be channels of healing.

With this in mind, in a few weeks we hope to introduce this ministry more into our services. Some of us will have, in the past (and perhaps later today during communion), come for prayer and the laying on of hands in the chapel, and, speaking for myself, those are the holiest moments, the holiest ground. And some of us will testify of that experience of the healing we find in reassurance, in comfort, in simply being heard. I claim no special power here, the power to heal belongs to God. And because this ministry of healing and wholeness belongs to us all, after the 10.30am service a few trusted folk will be available to listen and to pray with you about anything.

So, let me end with a beautiful prayer we use at the healing service on a Wednesday morning: 'O Christ, our healer, as in times past not all the sick and suffering found their own way to your side but had to have their hands taken or their bodies carried, or their names mentioned; so we, confident of your goodness, come ourselves and bring others to you'.

