

Wade Street 18th January 2009
John 4:43-54

When I was invited to preach on this passage this morning I was pleased because the subject of healing is dear to my heart and I am glad to share both thoughts and practice given the opportunity.

Liz asked me to draw to your attention that this passage represents the second of the “Signs” in John’s Gospel. The first one was the Wedding at Cana of Galilee at which Jesus turned water into wine—quite a nice topic to preach on too, I think! - but this one is the second and it shows Jesus as a healer.

I guess I ought to say something about what it means with reference to Jesus but implicit in that is what it means for the gospel message he brought and embodied and how it should influence our living out of that gospel today.

But first something about the passage. I would suggest that those who are going to look at this in a house group might like to consider the parallel stories in the synoptic Gospels because this is one of those that appears in each though different in detail in each account. Each writer has a slightly different focus, a slightly different reason for telling the story.

There are key facts. One is that Jesus is in Galilee. This account has him returning to Cana having been to Jerusalem for the Passover and having stopped at Samaria en route where he met the Samaritan woman at the well. The story at the well has given Jesus the status of the giver of life—in that case the one who offers living water.

So here we have a man who is described as a government official—could be a Jew or could be a Gentile in this account—and having heard of Jesus’ reputation comes to ask him to heal his son—or perhaps his boy—who is seriously ill apparently with a fever. John has Jesus initially rebuffing the man (as he has done Mary at Cana and as Mark has him respond to the Syro-Phoenician woman). We are told later that this was the second sign that Jesus gave but he actually criticises the people because they are looking for miracles and signs of the coming Messiah.

The way in which Jesus responds leads the man to make it clear that he believes in Jesus. “Sir come with me before my child dies”. And without further ado Jesus declares the child healed. The official takes Jesus at his word and on his journey home, presumably the next day, he was met by his servants who confirmed that at the moment Jesus had spoken him healed the fever had left him. At that he and his family “believed”, by which we mean they put their full faith in Jesus as God whereas earlier he had believed in him as a healer. (Remember that at the end of his Gospel John wrote “These have been written that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God and that through your faith in him you may have life”.

Faith in Jesus leads to restoration and life.

Now let me talk about healing more generally as we discover it today.

I have travelled almost in a full circle in relation to healing—spiral might be more accurate. It started in the mid-80s with a concern that the church didn’t really take the example of Jesus seriously in terms of meeting the needs of those who

were sick. This led me gradually into what most people would consider a classic model of healing ministry.

Prayers for healing..

discovery of “healing hands”...

regular formal prayers and informal pastoral ministry.

Promotion of healing in Germany—seminars etc trying to get people to engage in literally hands-on ministry.

Then in 2003 I came across the concept of Parish Nursing via a friend in the USA...

We ask God to heal those who are sick. Shouldn't we engage more in trying to prevent them becoming sick in the first place? (Loose quotation from Stephen Pattison.)

Have been experimenting with the concept for a couple of years here in Lichfield.

Throughout I have always come back to the instruction Jesus gave to his disciples when he sent them out: preach the good news and heal the sick.

I have always felt that we are good, especially in the protestant tradition, at using words. Our services are full of them. But preaching and healing seem to be out of balance.

Recently I came to a further conclusion..

When the disciples went out they actually went to preach healing.

Really the whole of our gospel is about healing.

The words heal and save are identical in some languages. Some of you know that I worked for some years in Germany. Heilen = heal, Heil = save, Heiland = saviour. The words link with “whole” in English so that Salvation is really about being made whole, being made complete—if you like, restored to what we were meant to be. This is salvation to rather than salvation from—if you understand what I mean (the focus is on the dry land rather than on the water where you were drowning).

My dilemma—and if you are quick you might have got there before me! - is that in the end I have totally undermined my initial argument by suggesting that all the activity of the church could be seen as healing so we don't need to focus specially on it.

And believe it or not this brings me back round to the passage in our gospel reading.

Jesus is the one who brings life in all its fullness. That does mean that he is concerned about physical wellbeing but it also means he has a ministry of reinstatement. Later on Lazarus is restored to life, but in due course he would die. Yet Jesus gives living water that wells up to eternal life.

I had an interesting conversation with colleagues the other evening—having reached this point in my preparation actually—over the whole question of expectation of healing or cure. It is fairly clear to me that there are many conditions which result from the fact that our bodies are disposable and therefore wear out. We can't seriously expect God to rewind our body clocks for us can we? And similarly there are plenty of people who are disabled in one way or another who are completely comfortable with their disability and could be described as whole. Only consider the Paralympics.

(And come to that there are plenty of people who are physically in perfect condition who are not at all “whole”).

So when we offer prayers or laying on of hands for healing we are placing ourselves within God’s purpose of bringing salvation, of bringing wholeness into the lives of those who are in some way or other prevented from being what they could be in God’s providence.

We shall offer laying on of hands in the course of our communion shortly. Anyone who feels broken in any way or perhaps would like to receive the laying on of hands on behalf of someone for whom they care deeply will be invited to come into God’s presence to receive what God has to offer.

And beyond that let’s see how we can best work to bring healing into the life of the world, its institutions and its governments..

May we each seek wholeness in our own lives for the good of the world.