



The Guild of St Raphael

Christ's Ministry of Healing

Healing and the Prayer of Faith

*An address given at the Haydock Branch on
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The Christian Church has from the very earliest times had a Ministry of Healing.

Read James 5 vv13-18

Are any among you suffering? They should pray. Are any cheerful? They should sing songs of praise. 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; and anyone who has committed sins will be forgiven. Therefore confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed. The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective. Elijah was a human being like us, and he prayed fervently that it might not rain, and for three years and six months it did not rain on the earth. Then he prayed again, and the heaven gave rain and the earth yielded its harvest.

If you read the Gospels you will find many examples of Jesus' healing miracles - I think there are well over a dozen. For example there is the healing of Simon Peter's mother-in-law, of the Centurion's servant, of the blind man, of the woman with haemorrhage, of the ten lepers, &c &c. Healing miracles occur in all four Gospels. Some of these healings involved touch - such as Our Lord's healing of Malchus' ear. The blind man's eyes were anointed with mud. Others such as the centurion's servant were cases of healing at a distance - you might say by remote control.

The Apostles continued this ministry. As I am sure you recall, all the synoptic gospels record Jesus sending out the Twelve with instructions to “*heal every disease and sickness*” *Matt 10.1*. They continued in the same vein after Pentecost, Peter and John healing the lame beggar (*Acts 3*), Philip healing in Samaria (*Acts 8*) and Paul (*Acts 19.11*) healing in Ephesus. Here it is recorded that even handkerchiefs and aprons that he had touched were taken to the sick and their illnesses were cured.

But biblical healings are not confined to the New Testament. Elisha (*2Kings 5*) oversaw the healing of Naaman. Moses (*Num.21. 8*) lifted up the Serpent in the wilderness to heal those bitten by the snakes. So a ministry of healing is not just a dispensation for the time of Jesus and the Apostles as some people have argued.

All this brings us hard up against two problems:

- Why were these people healed?
- Why were so many others not cured.?

I think these difficult questions were the reason that the ministry of healing became rather neglected for several centuries, and it is to groups like the Guild of St Raphael that the Church should be grateful for the recovery of this biblical ministry. Healing is one of the ‘Gifts of the Spirit’ to which Paul refers in 1 Corinthians.

But why were some people healed and others not? We have one well attested miracle at Haydock, about which I am sure that you know more than I do, but why one, why not a hundred or a thousand? We have to admit that we do not have a complete answer, but we can find some pointers.

We live in time, in a universe in which nothing is truly permanent. All life on earth is transitory; the earth itself, the sun and the stars have a finite lifespan. Now it’s not as bad as the famous hymn writer penned (presumably on a bad day!) “*change and decay in all around I see*”. There is growth, there is new life but we must recognise that all things will eventually come to an end. We live in an imperfect universe, what theologians call a fallen state. The cycle of birth, life and death seems to be fundamental in the universe as we know it.

I believe that the biblical healings we have been given and the miraculous healings which sporadically continue to be given are signs, demonstrations of God’s power. We cannot live for ever on this earth, it is not the natural order; it follows that we cannot expect to cure all

diseases, but we can experience the working of God in power in our lives and in our world.

Human beings are not machines - we are mind, body and spirit. If we cannot all have physical cures, and remember even the great apostle Paul was not cured of his 'thorn in the flesh', we can all experience spiritual healing, becoming at one and at peace with God, and with ourselves. This can be, if you like, a personal inner miracle.

We do have to be careful if we engage in Christ's healing ministry. Sick people are often vulnerable and we must take care not to offer what we cannot deliver. We must be very careful not to give the impression that a lack of cure is due to a lack of faith - for we must not so judge. I am sure it goes without saying that the worst excesses of (often trans-Atlantic) ecclesial communities - I hesitate to call them churches - must be avoided. I remember my dad being sent a postage stamp sized piece of sack with a circular letter saying that if he put it under his pillow and returned the envelope with £250 pounds he would be prayed for and could expect a favourable result!! Not even the roof fund is that important!

We must be even more careful about attributing sickness to sin. It is well known that guilt and emotional problems cause much distress and sickness and can make a real contribution to physical illness. We have to recognise that we are all sinners. It is however too simplistic and potentially damaging to attribute illness to individual sin. Yes the world is not perfect, we are not perfect; but we must avoid giving the impression that a particular person's illness is a consequence of their sins. We recognise that illness is part and parcel of living in an imperfect fallen world.

We should be very thankful that here in Haydock we have a branch of the Guild of St Raphael. In the Guild, the ministry of healing is rooted in prayer and Sacrament. Go back to the letter of James, possibly the first Bishop of Jerusalem:

*Is anyone suffering – they should pray;
is anyone cheerful – they should pray;
is anyone sick – they should pray and call on the elders of
the Church.*

Prayer is central, communication with and communion with God. Touch becomes important in healing; people who are listened to or given time and appropriate touch can feel valued and healed. In the laying on of hands the church is giving time and prayer for an individual; for that few

moments the whole church is focussed on them. Subsequent anointing with holy oil, blessed by the bishop in Apostolic Succession, links that person back to the Apostles and to Christ himself.

All this set within the Sacrament of the Mass, the great healing sacrament instituted by our Lord himself, through which in communion with angels and archangels and the saints throughout the ages we can claim the power of Jesus' Resurrection in our own lives. In it we are given a foretaste of the great heavenly banquet at which all creation will be healed and the whole creation renewed. Remember right back in the story of the Garden of Eden (*Gen.2*) there were two trees, one of which was the Tree of Life; Adam and Eve were not prohibited from eating of that tree. God intended humankind to share in his eternal life, and as we walk through Passiontide we are reminded that the Cross, which was for Jesus the tree of death, can become for us the Tree of Life.

About the Author:



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