

## **Sunday 5 February 2006: The Fourth Sunday before Lent**

### **The city was gathered for healing**

**Readings: Mark 1:29-39; 1 Corinthians 9:16-23**

*'That evening, at sundown, they brought to him all who were sick or possessed with demons. And the whole city was gathered around the door.'* Mark 1:32

After Pentecost this year we will be piloting a new series of Sunday 6.30 Services. For almost two decades on Sunday evenings we have used four different liturgies on a monthly rotation. They were put together with a great deal of creativity, freshness of thought and theological sensitivity. And it's now time to take the bits which have proved timeless and which still engage and enliven us, and weave them into some new liturgies.

One of the striking things about the whole process has been the consensus of opinion on what is timeless – what has endured and must be carried forward as we put together the new framework. Amongst other things we have found ourselves saying, perhaps with particular conviction, 'in some shape or form, we have to keep the *Service with the Laying on of Hands for Healing* – because it works'.

We have to keep the healing, because it works.

This might not be a church with which you would associate the phrase 'signs and wonders' or where you would expect to hear the message 'come to Christ and all your financial and health worries, your relationship problems and your career crises will be instantly resolved'. And you'd be right not to expect that. For most of us, how God works in our lives is a little more subtle than that – as our Ten Point Charter states we live with 'the mess in the middle' – in the middle of our lives, of our communities, of our world.

But we live with it in the belief that right at the heart of the complexity and falling short, there is the hope of renewal and reinvigoration and God's grace. So month after month on a Sunday evening – and on the last Wednesday of the month at our evening Eucharist - we explicitly encourage people to offer their lives to God in the expectation of healing, whatever that might mean. And there is a conviction amongst us that it works – whatever that might mean.

The introduction to the *Service with the Laying on of Hands for Healing* tries to explore some of what it might mean. It tells us:

'The experience of healing will be different for each individual. The promise is not of recovery from every illness or injury, but of the grace of Christ, whatever our circumstances, to live at peace with ourselves, with each other and with God. Sometimes healing is complete and miraculous, sometimes not. But every miracle that does happen is a sign and a promise of the ultimate healing in which we shall all share ...'

There is an explicit connection here between healing and the way in which we live in relation to one another. And it resonates with what we have heard from St Paul this morning.

‘For though I am free with respect to all, I have made myself a slave to all, so that I might win more of them. To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law (though I myself am not under the law) so that I might win those under the law ... I have become all things to all people, that I might by all means save some. I do it all for the sake of the gospel, so that I may share in its blessings’.

We contribute more or less to the healing of the communities in which we live and the individuals with whom we come into contact, by our ability to be among and alongside them in a way which may challenge or provoke, but which primarily offers understanding, empathy, human connection and creative engagement with difference. We share the blessings of the Gospel not by flaunting with blind conviction what we believe we have found to be the absolute truth. Rather by the mutual exchange in a spirit of learning of what we have found to be of worth with what others are telling us is of worth to them. And in all of this we respect difference and pray for the healing of communities and individuals and that we might not - carelessly or deliberately - contribute to anything which damages or hurts them.

The world is currently witnessing the damage human beings inflict on one another when freedom of expression is exercised at the cost of sensitivity or any basic human respect. The cartoon depicting the prophet Muhammad as a terrorist first appeared in a Danish newspaper last September – over four months ago. Today the Syrian authorities are criticised by Denmark, Norway and the United States for failing to prevent the attacks on their embassies in Damascus, which have come as a result of the recent reprinting of that cartoon in European newspapers. We can’t help but wonder how far we will descend the spiral of hurt and recrimination before we hit the bottom, and how the world will look when we get there. And how unnecessary it was that we should even begin the descent.

We might do well to listen to St Paul, who understood that just because you can do something doesn’t mean that you should: ‘For though I am free with respect to all, I have made myself a slave to all’.

Watching the development of the conversation about Iran’s nuclear capability, we realise the horrors that can and might ensue when nations act independently of one another’s concerns. But we also realise the complexity of that conversation, when many of the powers trying to put the brakes on the situation in Iran have possessed that same destructive capability for decades. The path to healing is a long and difficult one in circumstances as convoluted as that.

For most of us the daily arena of our influence – the space within which we can bring either healing or destruction – is rather narrower than that world stage. But we can’t

afford complacency - there is a reality to the suggestion that the global community is simply our own world writ large. So it matters that we pay attention to healing – to a longing for wholeness - in our own lives and communities. And that we recognise the truth of this morning's Collect, for ourselves and for others, that 'by reason of the frailty of our nature we cannot always stand upright'.

We need to do that through the priorities that we set for our lives as individuals and as families, and by the way that we approach friendships and relationships. We need to do it through our work – whatever form that might take. And we need to do it for ourselves. God's imperative is that the world should be healed, and that can happen only through God's interaction with the people who populate and shape and enliven that world. And that interaction is defined by our willingness to trust that in and through us God can heal – whatever that might mean, however it might look, and whatever it might demand of us.

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