

## Baptismal healing

Let me read you a sentence or two from a very long Report compiled for the House of Bishops 24 years ago on the Healing Ministry

‘When Jesus was baptised in the waters of the river Jordan, and the Holy Spirit descended on him, God inaugurated a ministry of healing that was to change the world. This baptism was an epiphany, a revelation of God’s will, the seeds of a ministry and a life that were to change the world’

We need to think for a moment in ultimates. Let me explain what I mean. The ultimate result of sickness is death. The ultimate kind of healing therefore is resurrection, the defeat of death. The story of Jesus was about his defeat of death, and therefore it is about a different way of approaching all sickness. That was particularly true for those of his contemporaries who saw sickness only in causal terms - if someone was ill, it must be because they or their parents had done wrong. Jesus scotched that idea very forcibly. But without descending into that kind of rather silly cause and effect, sickness is symptomatic of the human condition, about the frailty of the flesh, the fallenness of the world, the ultimate difference between God who is immortal, and mankind, which is not.

And yet when it comes to baptism, we talk about the gift of eternal life, of being united with Jesus who has conquered death. That of course is what Paul was driving at when he wrote to the Christians in Rome. He said when we are baptised, we are baptised into Christ’s death. We die with him so that we can rise with him. So we are entering into the ultimate healing, the reversal of all that limits our humanity.

It has to be in that context therefore that we approach God for those lesser healings, those healings-along-the-way we might call them, which may or may not be his will, but are certainly insignificant compared with the healing which we claim is already ours because we have die and risen with Christ in baptism. Our wholeness stems from being made one with the perfection, the wholeness of Christ. Let’s take another look at that connection with Christ’s baptism. What Jesus was doing in submitting to John’s call to baptism was to identify himself with the sin of the world - not with sins of his own, for orthodox Christianity has always said Christ was sinless, nor indeed with the sins (in the plural) of the world - but with the sin with which the world is imbued through and through. Jesus always saw sin (not sins) as the root of what needed healing - he said if you remember to those who disputed with him about the man lowered through the ceiling - ‘Is it easier to say your sins are forgiven or to say take up your bed and walk?’ As far as he was concerned, the two went hand in hand, or were synonymous. By his incarnation he became man. By his baptism he said he became one with sinful humanity. Through his

conquering of death he becomes the means of salvation (which is a word which ultimately means health)

But Jesus never allowed all this to become airy-fairy theory. He brought that ministry of healing in a physical way. He touched, he spat and made a paste which he put on a man's eyes. He told people to go and wash in the pool of Siloam. That was because he was respecting the eternal value of the body in a way that his contemporaries, both Jewish and Greek tended not to do. We end up in the Creed with the expression 'the resurrection of the Body', not 'the immortality of the soul'.

So when we think about the way we approach healing today, we need to compare it with what he did. We pray for healing, and that is consistent with his practice. We lay hands on people - which is exactly what Jesus did and told his followers to do. The church which is the body of Christ ministers physically as Jesus ministered physically. But we also sometimes anoint. Jesus, as far as we know did not. Have we gone beyond his brief and example? The answer is also a resounding No, when we recall what we often call Jesus. He is the Christ, the anointed One. In a sense he is the oil of healing himself - that is what his name says. To use physical oil is therefore entirely right for us, but would have been superfluous for him.

So today, the feast of the baptism of Christ is a good day to seek the healing of the Christ, the anointed one who identifies himself with sinful humanity, and is himself the means and the pattern of healing for us all. And in healing we continue to see the truth of the incarnation and the baptism - that Christ touches us because he is one with us, so that we can be one, and whole with him.