

Healing from within

John 14:15-26

I wonder what you understand by 'healing'. Let me start by raising the question of where does healing come from - and before you go off in a pious flight of fancy about it coming from God, let me earth you the fact that I mean something far less holy. Does healing come from outside, or inside? You might legitimately answer "It all depends". If you have a skin condition, and you are prescribed a cream, or if like me at this time of the year, you have eyes sore with hay fever, and are prescribed drops, then it would be legitimate to say that the healing is from the outside in. On the other hand, if your illness leads to your being prescribed medicine or tablets, then you could argue that the direction is from the inside out. Or indeed you could argue that if you are receiving medicaments in any form, or indeed radio-therapy or surgery, then it is all from outside you, and the direction is inward. But let me share with you a story Bishop J.V. Taylor tells in his book on the Holy Spirit. A New York ophthalmic surgeon operates on a woman's eye. A week later, nothing has changed from the way things were at the end of the operation, and ten days later, the original condition is beginning to return. So he explains to the woman that she is under a misapprehension as she thinks he is a healer. He is not, he is a surgeon. Let me quote him: "I put the tissues together so that they can heal in a way that they could not if they were separated. I cannot heal you, I can merely put your eye back together again. Now I must do so again, because your eye has come apart again. But if there is to be healing, it will have to be yours, not mine." The next day he operated again, and ten days later she was completely healed.

There is a growing medical realisation of the truth of that incident. No longer do doctors see themselves as the healers so much as those who enable healing. The pills and potions enable healing, but cannot of themselves heal. The healing comes from our own bodies resources, and cannot happen without them. If people don't want to get better, then they won't get better, despite medical science's best endeavours. Whatever you originally thought about whether healing is from outside or inside, I would argue that in truth, it always has to be from inside.

Now how does that tie in with the action of the laying on of hands, which is something we used to offer every week in my parish in Surrey. People who wished could go into a side chapel on their way back from receiving Communion, and two of us would lay hands on them and pray for them, There, very obviously and demonstrably, the action of healing is from the outside. Surely that is contradicting what I have just said? I think not. Is it not true that this action of laying on hands is very similar to the process described by that surgeon, or the effect of taking some drug. It cannot of itself do anything, but it may help create conditions in which the healing can come from inside? If the hands were being laid on by a "faith healer", then the effect would be precisely that - of creating the conditions in which the human body's own resources for healing are marshalled and invigorated. Whoever lays on hands, is not a faith healer, but an agent of God's gift of healing in and through his church.

We have to take this a stage further. We talk in our ecclesiastical jargon about the indwelling of the Holy Spirit - God living in us. So in the heart of us, as part of our very being, we have all those things which

we know we can predicate about God. We have in our being love, forgiveness, peace, holiness. The immediate self-deprecating reaction to that is to say "Well, I don't have an awful lot of things like that in me". All right, that may be true, but you have them, in some measure, if we take seriously the truth of the gift of the Holy Spirit to us *all*. At the heart of us is God who created our life and sustains our life, who is the one who forgives, and the one who heals. He is not slapped on the outside, like sticking plaster, but is at the core of our being. And what is true of each of us as individual Christians is also true of the Christian community as a whole. I believe we constantly have to think in both individual and communal terms. The gift of the Holy Spirit about which we hear in the Gospel reading was a gift to certain individuals, true enough, but it was also, because they received that gift, a gift to the *community* of which they were part. St Paul in writing to the Corinthians goes out of his way to emphasise that a gift to an individual is for the benefit of the whole community. We don't all need all the specific gifts of the Spirit, because they are given to us severally to share.

So let me put these images together. From **within** the body of Christ comes the gift of healing, expressed in action by members of the Spirit-filled community laying hands on those who wish for it. The healing comes from inside the Body of Christ, the Church. And the effect of that is to enable the person receiving healing also to be healed **from within**. For it is not only the natural, and God-given resources of the human body which are available, but also that spiritual gift within, which we call the Holy Spirit in our hearts. Do you recall the words of Charles Wesley in the hymn "O thou who camest from above" - "And still **stir up** the gift in me." By this conjunction of the healing within the Body of the Church and the healing that comes from the presence of God in the body of the individual, things can happen in an extraordinary way. For the gift stirred up in us is that gift of the Spirit.

There are so many images of the Holy Spirit which key into this - but let me just point you to one or two of them. John's gospel talks of the "Advocate" - the word is notoriously difficult to translate, and other versions speak of the "Comforter". That certainly ties in with this notion of healing. To be comforted is to be healed, to be made at peace with oneself, or with God, or whoever. Another possible translation is "Consoler", which has much the same resonances. Or we could think of the word "anoint" - a word Peter uses in a speech reported in Acts to describe how the Holy Spirit was given to Jesus. Indeed we constantly remind ourselves of that when we use the word Christ, which means "the Anointed One". We are anointed with the Holy Spirit - oil being the image both of consecration and of healing in the Old Testament. The Holy Spirit who comforts, consoles and anoints is God's gift within us. And from him, the Spirit, the breath of life, for the word is the same in Hebrew, is what makes life whole.

But I have to return to the point I made earlier - that in ourselves, and maybe in those around us, we don't see enormous evidence of the wholeness and goodness which is at our heart by this gift. Wesley prays for the gift to be stirred up. And Paul talked to the Galatians about the **fruit** of the Spirit - and then lists love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, humility and self-control. Fruit takes time to mature, and some of the buds may be pretty weak in us. But the power for growth comes from within, and by the grace of God is possible. When we come for healing, we are asking that God will stir up the gift of wholeness in us, getting rid of the things which stand between us and our wholeness, like pruning round the tree, and then will enable the fruit - the end result - of the Spirit within us to be seen in those gifts that blossom from wholeness, the things which he lists.

Our healing is within us, because we are made to be whole, it is the will of God that we should be whole. And by the fact that the Spirit is given to us, we can stir up that gift. Hands laid on us will do that, for they too come from within the Body - the Body of Christ. People have often used the image of electricity in talking of the Holy Spirit - unseen, but real power. We are all aware of making the connections - allowing the power to flow. It is as though through this God-given act of laying on hands, we are making the connections - and the power in the healing community, and the power of the healing Spirit within are joined, and what lies between them - our sinful, unwhole bodies, can change.