

Healing words

Isaiah 35:3-6

From time to time, we all have to fill in medical forms - whether for insurance companies, employers or whatever. As you look down the list of ailments you might have had, it can be quite reassuring that you can keep saying: No-No-Not applicable, or whatever. As time goes on, I find I am not so often re-assured!

We have an early version of this in our Old Testament Reading today. Maybe you would like to make a mental note of your replies - Do you have problems with your: 1) hands, 2) knees, or 3) heart? Are you: 4) blind 5) deaf? 6) lame or 7) dumb?. Maybe several of them - maybe none. But I have to say that the questions are misleading, because undoubtedly Isaiah was meaning more than the physical conditions that might have been going through your mind. Let's explore that a little. Isaiah says that God makes a difference to these conditions when he redeems his people. Let's see what that promise might be saying to us.

Weak hands are more than being unable to lift a heavy book without pain. Just think of the ways we talk about weak hands - "my hands are tied" - "I seem to have lost my grip". Strong hands mean we have power and control. But then things happen which make us feel our hands are useless - we can't achieve anything. But the gospel talks about God putting power back into our hands, enabling us to be his servants, working for him. As the hymn says "Christ has no hands but our hands to do his work today". What is more, God uses human hands to bring strength to others - the healing hands of doctors and nurses, of physiotherapists and occupational therapists, and the hands that are laid on with prayer. Our weak hands, our powerlessness, can be transformed by the grace of God.

Feeble knees may prevent you from being very active. But again let's think a bit wider. "My knees were shaking" people say when they are facing some task that they think may be beyond them. The Bible is full of stories of people who thought like that - from Jeremiah complaining he was too young to do anything for God, to the apostles hiding away after the resurrection because they were scared to come out into the open. But those stories all end with the proof that God does something about tottering knees. Jeremiah answered the call, and the apostles at Pentecost were able to speak with confidence and boldness. Let's extend it even further. Are your weak knees a sign that your prayers aren't up to much? The good news is that we don't have to be "good at" prayer, or experts. What Paul wrote to the Romans was that the Holy Spirit takes up our weak prayers, and intercedes for us. However weak we feel our knees are, they can be powerfully effective if we will sue them.

And then we have the question of heart conditions. Really, the word Isaiah uses means "anxious". We use the word heart just like this in English, don't we? - "my heart fell, my heart skipped a beat". Worry is not only a threat to our physical well-being, but a sign that we are finding it difficult to trust God fully. Ezekiel talked about God taking people's hard stony hearts, and replacing them with new obedient hearts. Christian history is littered with dramatic stories of people whose whole life was changed by God. Maybe for us there is less drama - but the promise is a new heart in answer to that prayer expressed in Charles Wesley's hymn: "O for a heart to praise my God, a heart from sin set free...a humble, lowly contrite heart, believing true, and clean...a heart in every thought renewed and full of love divine."

So - how is this health check doing? If you have hand, knee or heart problems, look to God for healing - it is there for the asking. But we must continue down the list. Blindness is often used in everyday language to mean more than not being able to see what is around us. "How could I have been so blind?" people ask, when they have been taken in. "I just couldn't see what it was all about." When Elisha's servant was scared to death by the Syrian army surrounding them, Elisha prays that God will open his eyes to see - and he sees the hillside covered with horses and chariots of fire. The story of Paul's conversion is told in terms of him being blinded by the light, and being made to see things in a new way. When we ignore God, we are blind to a truth which surrounds us, and we also need to have new sight.

Hearing impediments are more often psychological and spiritual than physical. We only hear what we want to hear. Like people with hearing aids who deliberately switch them off when it suits them to do so, we don't really listen. Like Elijah on Mount Sinai, we have to remember that God is not necessarily to be heard in noisy things, but in the "still small voice".

Lameness means you can't get about. You are handicapped, so that everything is more of a struggle. But we don't limit that to physical disabilities in the way we talk - we speak of "lame ducks", of people who have been crippled by the emotional damage that has been done to them.

Being dumb is immensely frustrating. The son of the Vicar with whom I served my curacy was dumb - and the temper that frustration created was sometimes very frightening for his parents. You are locked in yourself. But again, it doesn't just have to be physical. "I was speechless!" is usually a reaction to something shocking. "I didn't know what to say" is a sign of helplessness and feeling useless. The gift of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost was to give just such people the voice they needed to proclaim to the world what God had done in Jesus.

When Isaiah wrote those words he was speaking to his nation. In his day, he could see they were spiritually weak, feeble and fearful. They were blind to God, deaf to what God was saying, disabled by their disobedience. So his vision of God's love overcoming all that was what they needed to hear. It is no coincidence that when we read the stories of what Jesus did, they include healing people who could walk, and who lived lives full of fear, stories of blind people being able to see, and deaf people able to hear, and dumb people able to speak. Over and above any physical healing, these healings were also signs of spiritual realities which were at the heart of what Jesus had to tell every single one of us, however healthy we might physically be. We are all blind and deaf to God to some extent. We all need a new heart. The gospel is that that kind of healing is always there. So sometimes is physical healing. And very often the two go hand in hand. When people get things in tune with God, they cope with their ailing bodies much better.

I hope this health check has been helpful for you – it seems an appropriate thing to do on the feast of St Luke -"the beloved physician".