Sermon for 5th in Ordinary Year B

Readings: Isaiah 40:21-31; Mark 1:29-39

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Is the pope Catholic? By that comment I mean: Have you ever seen a cricketer who doesn’t have a cricket bat: Or a racing driver who can’t drive a car? A jockey who has never ridden a horse? No? Then how could you have a Messiah who couldn’t heal the sick?

The healing ministry of Jesus explodes onto the scene. It’s not that there have never been healers before; it’s not that there are no others around who can’t do some of these things too; it’s just that no one does them like Jesus does.

Jesus doesn’t perform these extraordinary deeds in the name of some other god, but commands the powers of the natural world by his own authority, in his own name! And it still works! So what does this mean? Who can Jesus be? In whose authority does he act?

Jesus also exercises spiritual healing. Perhaps there was no other sort of healing in his day, before us modern folk divorced science from religion as if they were two enemies in opposing camps. But again, Jesus uses religion in a way that others would not, and dare not. He uses his own name and he even forgives sins and to prove that his words of forgiveness have power he makes lame people walk, blind people see, leprous people clean and even dead people live! He even does this on Sabbath days, as he has just done in the synagogue at Capernaum and again in Simon Peter’s house. He breaks the rules and redraws them around himself. Jesus is either committing blasphemy in how he heals the sick – or – if you believe a man can only perform such miracles if God approves of him – what does this say about his authority not just over sickness – but about all else he says concerning the Kingdom of God?

And Jesus performs these healing miracles again and again. Sometimes they ask him, like the crowds that gather outside Simon Peter’s house. Sometimes Jesus takes the initiative, unbidden, such as with Simon Peter’s mother in law, or the son of the widow of Nain being carried out to the cemetery as Jesus happens to pass by, or sometimes because he is challenged by the evil spirits, such as in Capernaum synagogue that day.

Jesus is consistently potent and effective. The gospel writers are trying to tell us Jesus does not cure by fluke, but again and again and all manner of disease. God apparently continues to bless him with such powers. Therefore, God must presumably continue to approve of what he does and says too. Jesus is a phenomenon – and the word about him spreads quickly.

So the first thing we should note about the healing ministry of Jesus is that a Messiah that couldn’t heal or who didn’t heal would never have been recognised as a Messiah at all. Even less likely so, if that Messiah then surrenders himself for crucifixion by the Romans. Healing miracles reveal God is backing this man Jesus in a way that folk had to take notice of. He was either God’s special agent – or he healed the sick by the power of Satan – if you thought that could make any logical sense. But it had to be one or the other.

In this part of the liturgical year we are in the season of Epiphany – prior to the season of Lent. Epiphany means the “manifestation” – the deeds, words and actions of Jesus that declare to the world who he is and what he is about – and healing is an essential element of that manifestation.

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So what does healing tell us about Jesus and his Kingdom of God?

It tells us that God cares. The great God of the universe, creator of heavens beyond our imagining, still knows of our situation, knows of our suffering and truly cares. God is never indifferent to human pain. That alone was good news in a world where pain was inflicted in the arena just for public entertainment, where slaves could be beaten, or killed, and enemies were ritually humiliated and painfully slaughtered. It is good news today where girls are kidnapped and made into sex slaves for fanatical men to dominate, where innocent lives are lost by standing in the wrong street at the wrong time, or catching the wrong flight from the wrong airport.

It tells us God not only cares, but is capable of doing something about it, and that the truly effective source of God’s healing, restoring, merciful love is Jesus of Nazareth. There is no other name given under heaven by which salvation can be found.

It tells us that God’s ultimate plan is to remake the world into a new heaven and a new earth where tears shall be wiped away, where sorrow is dispelled by joy and all darkness in the human soul transformed by unquenchable light. If this is truly God’s plan, and the demonstration of God’s healing power exercised by Jesus seems to suggest it is, then that is good news for the whole world. It gives us the direction in which we should travel – our aim likewise should be to alleviate suffering, to heal the sick, and to strengthen the weak.

The healing miracles of Jesus do not only tell us who Jesus is; they tell us what God is like.

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So why stop when you’re onto a winner? Why did Jesus slip away from Capernaum early in the morning when all the crowds of sick people were still waiting for him outside Peter’s house?

Peter wasn’t very pleased about it: “They’re all looking for you!” he says, angrily, having finally tracked Jesus down.

Perhaps we’re not too pleased by it either. It would certainly help our mission today if every minister could simply wave a hand or say a pray and the sick were instantly healed. If we could just send a blessed handkerchief through the post like St. Paul, or perhaps put virtual hankies onto the Methodist website! Oh if only, we could still do it as they did, as Jesus did.

Well, we can’t; and for most of Christian history we haven’t been able to either. That’s not to say we can never do it, just that it’s a rare thing to see a healing miracle.

For most of us and for most of the time we live in a world where suffering and pain continue. For in Christ we get a glimpse, a brief preview of what is the ultimate hope to which we are called. One day we shall have a new heaven and a new earth where tears and pain are no more; but for now we have to face the reality of human suffering, to experience pain and loss and yet still believe in God’s love; to witness the suffering of the innocent and still believe in God’s justice; to feel the hatred and prejudice of the world and still believe in God’s peace.

But if Jesus himself walked away from healing the sick, what are we to make of that?

Jesus said, “Let’s go somewhere else – so that I can preach there also. That is why I have come.” Now that’s really bad news for anyone who doesn’t like sermons! Seems like the sermon is an indispensable part of what Jesus has to offer.

This is because healing alone risks becoming an end in itself. When the devil offered Jesus the temptation in the wilderness to jump down from the temple and remain unharmed as the angels of the Lord brought him safely to the ground, this temptation was to do the spectacular, popular bit – the healing miracles for example. The whole world would love a healer. The whole world would rush to his door demanding his healing touch. All the world would get exactly what it wanted – an easy way out of pain and suffering.

But the world getting what it wants is not the same thing as the world getting what it needs. That’s where the preaching of the Kingdom of God comes in. All the healing in the world, even being raised to new life from death like Lazarus, would ultimately leave you none the better; for what you truly need is to recognise, confront and defeat the source of human pain and suffering – the guilt of our sins – and the disastrous consequences of our choices.

That is not as popular as healing, but it is the only way that leads to the ultimate healing of the world and of our souls.

Jesus came to bring us a glimpse of God’s saving, healing power and the promise that God’s ultimate goal is to set us all free from pain and suffering – but the only way to do that is by going to the cross of Jesus – by confronting our share in the troubles and pains of our world – by nailing our pride and our ignorance and our self-assertion to the cross and receiving with humility the free gift of salvation.

If the Church could dispense miracles on the hour every hour to the sick and suffering, the world would beat a path to our door – and some churches do try to offer such incentives – but would we thereby neglect the other, darker, more difficult truth which the cross teaches us? – The price of healing is high – for it cost the Son of God his life on the cross. That might make the Church less popular than we could be, but it is the path which Jesus himself took and which we, to remain faithful, must take ourselves also.

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**February 2015**