

FIVE SERMONS ABOUT HEALING

1. The Healing of the Blind Man in Two Stages (Isaiah 6.1-9; Mark 8.22)
2. The casting out of a demon from a man in the synagogue (Numbers 9:15-end; Mark 1:21-28)
3. Healing after the Transfiguration: the boy with the deaf and dumb spirit (Isaiah 35; Mark 9)
4. Jairus's daughter and the woman with hemorrhage (Judges 13.1-7, 24-26; Mark 5.22)
5. Man through the roof (Isaiah 37; Mark 2.1-12)

Introduction

Simon asked me to preach about the Church's sacrament of healing before offering it at church, because it seems it hasn't been offered here for many years, and there may be misunderstandings about what it is and what we should expect from it.

Some of the questions I've asked myself:

- Why do the gospels talk about Jesus as a miraculous healer?
- What are they teaching us?
- Why are the disciples recorded as healers? Can we do this?
- Will it work? Are there clever ways to make it work?
- What if it doesn't work? (spoiler alert: we all die)
- What is the connection between illness and sin?
- What is the connection between body and soul?

The constraints for anyone preaching about healing is that they are preaching to a group of people about the most personal, intimate, and painful aspects of our being, and to vulnerable individuals who are at different stages of life and spiritual maturity. We may lack knowledge, and we certainly lack time if we're going to respect the Anglican intolerance of long sermons, but we're dealing with an infinite mystery, which is God.

General observations don't have the same value as spiritual conversation; and four sermons can't cover all the aspects of healing in Mark's healing stories – let alone the three other gospels. (I have used Mark's gospel as a basis for our learning to complement the use of Mark's gospel in our concurrent Christianity Explored course.)

Historical background

Despite the instruction in the Epistle of James to call for the elders for prayer if one is sick, the earliest evidence for the practice of church healing is a text for the blessing of oil for the sick in the prayer book of Bishop Sarapion c.350CE. We know that by 500CE it has become a priestly ministry.

This practice of anointing with oil developed during the Middle Ages and was used particularly near the point of death: 'extreme unction'. The Council of Trent (1545-63) codified this: 'If anyone says that extreme unction is not truly and properly a sacrament instituted by Christ our Lord and announced by the blessed Apostle James, but is only a rite received from the Fathers

or a human invention, let him be anathema. If anyone says that the anointing of the sick neither confers any grace nor remits sins nor comforts the sick, but that it has already ceased, as if it had been a healing grace only in the olden days, let him be anathema.' (Calvin said that limiting anointing with oil to a priestly sacrament is cruel and unscriptural.) Vatican 2 revisions in 1968 broadened extreme unction once again, calling it 'the Anointing of the Sick'.

The Church of England had various societies on its Catholic wing, like St Raphael's or Crowhurst, where the sacrament of healing was taken seriously, and Evangelical and Pentecostal Charismatic churches have always invoked the healing power of the Spirit; but the sacrament of healing was largely unregarded in ordinary parishes until a C of E report, *A Time to Heal*, published in 2000, which encouraged the revival and the practice of healing ministries more widely. Some favour a formal, sacramental approach, while others offer healing using the laying on of hands and extempore prayer; others use both.

Healing oils are blessed each year in Anglican cathedrals and sent to parishes for anointing the sick. The oils are the same as those used at baptism, and the anointing is the same: every Christian who wears the sign of the cross signals that they belong to Christ. They are anointed as a new royal priesthood, and their baptism is a washing away of sin and evil by the Holy Spirit, who comes to dwell within the person.

Good and bad news about healing

The bad news is that there is no technique. We are mortal creatures. Love opens us to grief because we give our hearts to others, over whose destiny we have no control.

There is no explanation or guarantee. The meaning of miracle is *mirare* to wonder. We pray for God's healing touch to make us whole, as supplicants for a medicine that we don't understand or own, only dimly knowing what we're asking for.

Yes, of course we want a negative test result, or a favourable biopsy. But God's way of bringing us to wholeness will be in spite of and through death – Jesus's death and our own and the deaths of others we love and others we'll never know.

We can peer into the mystery, but we can't describe its contours.

The good news: We believe in one God, Father, Son and Spirit. We are made in the image of God, and our destiny is to have our image restored, and to share God's life.

One of the metaphors that the scriptures use is that of sight — so we begin this meditation on healing with Isaiah's vision of God, and a people who cannot or will not see God — a cursed people who are blind to God, deaf to God's laws, dumb because their words are venal — they don't praise and thank God. It's a spiritual malaise, but it certainly brings physical, moral and political repercussions, so from the beginning, biblical writers make a metaphorical connection between being blind, deaf, and dumb and the sinfulness and the spiritual malaise of God's neglectful people.

This connection is bad news for people who have disabilities or who fall ill, and has led to much stigma. But paradoxically, it is Christians who first began a fight back against our tendency to marginalize, even kill, people with genetic abnormalities and disabilities. We still have to be

careful to watch our language, but it's important to acknowledge that body and soul have a very complex relationship.

The healing miracles in Mark's gospel begin with the exorcism of a man in the synagogue — a small, homely-sounding incident that follows the victory that Jesus wins in the desert over Satan, after he himself has been baptized in the river Jordan. As we have seen, Mark is not teaching us about first-century mental-health issues: he is telling us that Jesus is Lord over all evils that affect humanity and creation.

From this developed the much-misunderstood concept of 'original sin'. In its most pessimistic, Augustinian form, evil is a tragic curse that clings to all of us, despite our baptism. I once complimented a young super-Evangelical mother on her exceptionally beautiful little two-year old. She said, 'Yes. It's a pity that these children are all limbs of Satan, isn't it?' Well, it's a view.

But the *biblical* origins of this concept is the idea from the Book of Genesis that our best, most God-like traits — our cleverness, our curiosity, our aspiration — are also the source of our downfall. That's how, in biblical terms, Satan is able to fool us. Jews understand the Adam and Eve story as more nuanced: the human couple must necessarily reach for God, and take ever-increasing responsibility for the world.

Meanwhile, the Wisdom/Spirit tradition of the Bible (and Jesus was above all a Wisdom teacher) avoids a causal link: people are not ill because they have sinned (though it's possible: gluttony, dependence on alcohol, the use of violence, and so forth can obviously end in illness and injury). We become ill and feel pain because we are made of friable stuff — neurons and pain-receptors. Our bodies grow, and, like all growing things, they will die.

But in the midst of this process, Wisdom constantly invites us to embrace her as the source of health and peace, life and resurrection. St Irenaeus (a second-century bishop) said that the glory of God is a person fully alive. That fulness of life must involve an exchange from mortal, physical cells to spiritual energy if it is to grow and outlive corporeal form.

The Church of England's words for the Laying of Hands

In the name of God the Father who created you,
receive Christ's healing touch to make you whole.

May the power of God strengthen you,
the love of God dwell in you and give you peace,
that you may serve him now and evermore.

and for Anointing for Healing

I anoint you in the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

May you be whole in body, mind and spirit,
and may God grant you the inward anointing of the Holy Spirit.

The Healing of a Blind Man in Two Stages

Isaiah 6:1-10

Mark 8:22-26

To be blind or visually impaired doesn't necessarily mean that you're spiritually blind. We will be observing the feast of the conversion of St Paul on Saturday — the dramatic moment when, as we say, he 'sees the light' (Acts 9) 'and when he was raised from the ground, his eyes were opened, and he saw nothing', and he remains without sight, or eating or drinking, for three days. Ananais lays his hands on him, and he receives his sight and is filled with the Holy Spirit. This is Paul's resurrection story.

This morning's lesson from Mark this touches on some of the questions people ask about sacrament of healing: does it work? What if it doesn't work? Or work completely? Just as a reminder, everyone Jesus healed died in the end.

When learning from the Bible, it is important to remember:

The New Testament is unfolding of the scriptures — i.e. what we call the Old Testament or, properly, the Hebrew Bible.

We work with the best text, language, and study of the literary structure to learn from the author, helped but not led by commentaries by others.

We assume that the writer has something important to teach us.

We don't explain away or skip bits, or apply knowledge gleaned from outside the writer's text.

And they came to Bethsaida. Bethsaida translates as house of hunting/fishing. Mark connects Bethsaida to Jesus walking on water, referring back to the beginning of creation (Genesis 1.2) and the cleansing of creation (Genesis 7.17) and the power of God. After the miraculous feeding of the 5,000, Jesus sent the disciples ahead of him to Bethsaida while he went up a mountain to pray (Mark 6.45). When he too decided he wanted to go to Bethsaida, he walked on the water with the intention of overtaking the disciples, who were struggling to stay afloat in a storm. This is a resurrection story. Just before the healing of the blind man, Jesus has to explain the feeding of the 5000 to his disciples, who think it's all about bread: 'Do you not perceive or understand? Are your hearts hardened? Having eyes do you not see? And having ears do you not hear?'

The blind man begs Jesus to touch him. Jesus doesn't just touch, as asked, but takes him by the hand and outside the village, and then spits on his eyes. What's the spitting about? Jesus tells Peter and the disciples that people will spit on him: and Mark recounts that twice more in the passion story. To spit on someone is, according to Jewish law, a sign that they have transgressed the law — they're outside it. Almost all the healing stories show Jesus defiling himself according to the law in order to make someone outside the law whole again, and restoring them to their own homes and relationships. Go figure. Then laying his hands on him. Asks 'if you see?' Then the blind man sees all things clearly. Jesus sends him to his own house, not back to the village.

The story forms a pair with the healing of the deaf-mute in Mark 5. Both miracles show the double fulfilment of Jesus's claim that he has come to reverse the great curse of Isaiah. 'The

eyes of the blind shall be opened and the ears of the deaf unstopped.’ (Isaiah 35), so this a spiritual healing of the breach between God and humanity.

Mark deliberately places this incident at the centre and turning point of his gospel. In the first half, the disciples too are blind and deaf to who Jesus is, though they are walking in the way. After this miracle, Jesus asks his disciples ‘Who do you say I am?’ Peter suddenly finds himself proclaiming the truth: you are the Messiah. (8.27) and immediately Jesus begins a second phase of revelation, explaining to Peter that he will be crucified.

Perhaps for all of us, truth and wholeness comes in stages: we may have a revelation of God — sometimes with profound physical and emotional impact — but understanding what that means for us, bringing our life and vocation into clearer focus, may take time, perhaps years.

Once you have seen all things clearly — a resurrection experience — don’t go back to your previous life. I constantly want to return to the cosiness of a world, and a religion, that is known and graspable. But the mystery — the miracle — I want that, too; so I should not just to cling to what I know, what is inevitably passing, but look for what is really miraculous: the eternal life that I’m called to, here and now and in the future.

The casting out of a demon from a man in the synagogue

Numbers 9:15-end

Mark 1:21-28

The subtitle of Christianity Explored is ‘What’s the best news you’ve ever heard?’ I’d settle for St John’s news: ‘Behold, the dwelling of God is with humankind. He will dwell with them and they shall be his people, and God himself will be with them. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death will be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain any more, for the former things have passed away.’

Christianity Explored prefers Mark’s good news, and Mark shoots straight from the hip: ‘The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the son of God, as it is written in Isaiah the prophet. . .’

A new baptism of the Spirit is promised — Isaiah knew all about that — and here is Jesus at the Jordan, with the Spirit announcing that yes, he is her son, and, not waiting to pose for that della Francesca painting, she drives him into the desert. This is her own territory: remember, the Spirit was banished from the Temple in Josiah’s reign. Here he is to confront Satan, the Accuser. The Hebrew scriptures taught that the Messiah must and will expel the Evil One from the earth (embodied by the scapegoat) before atonement/the renewing of creation by the sprinkling of the priest’s blood (replaced by the second goat) is made. The evil one had to be driven out before the creation could be renewed.

Let us not patronize Mark by assuming that he just doesn’t know much about mental illness. This man is not disturbed: he’s peacefully in the synagogue among the religious men of the city until Jesus walks in. But here is one of Satan’s children, embodied in Capernaum. And this man knows exactly who Jesus is. Mark has buttoned us into Isaiah, and you don’t have to look further than Isaiah 1 to find the children of the evil one identified precisely, the seed of evil-doers, who have corrupted the people of God.

They’re the reason God now hates their sacrifices. David’s prayer of dedication of the Temple is flung back at him: when you spread forth your hands, I will hide mine eyes from you; yea when ye make many prayers, I will not hear. Now is the faithful city become a harlot. It was full of righteousness, judgment lodged in it, but now murderers.

Why is Jesus in the synagogue? Because that’s where you will find the greatest evil. Satan is the master of deception, disguise, and lies, so look for him in the holiest of places, sounding very wise, appearing very holy. While it’s an epiphany for us, the demon and Jesus know exactly who the other is. The demon calls him ‘the Holy One’ — Isaiah’s phrase — and knows that Jesus has come to destroy him and his tribe.

No wonder all the people in that synagogue were amazed. They knew their Isaiah, and what’s more, they knew Isaiah’s good news: ‘If you will be willing and obedient, ye shall eat the good of the land. I will restore thy judges as at the first, and thy counsellors as at the beginning. Afterward thou shalt be called the city of righteousness, the faithful city . . . and the destruction of the transgressors and the sinners shall be together and they that forsake the Lord shall be consumed.’

Just tip your eyes into Isaiah chapter 2 and there is God’s promise that all nations shall flow up the mountains into the Lord’s house, and everyone will walk in his paths: they shall beat their

swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks: nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more.

If you ask any Jew why they don't believe that Jesus is the Messiah, I'm afraid they will say, 'Well, look around you. Has evil been thrown out? Has justice been restored? Are gatherings of Christians like cities of light set on a hill?'

What can we do to persuade them?

The healing of a boy after the Transfiguration

Isaiah 35

Mark 9.14-29

It is important to avoid misunderstandings about promises of healing. We do need to be careful. Identifying heresies is perhaps one of the Church's less attractive parlour games, but a recent court case in Australia involved the death of a teenage girl whose parents refused permission for a blood-transfusion. This shows how dangerous — in very ordinary, practical daily life — heresy, or the over-emphasizing of one aspect of Christian experience, can be.

So we read another story from Mark's gospel, and we try to understand its context and respect the author's writing. And we heard the passage from Isaiah that this little story seems to be based on.

This healing of a deaf/mute boy and Blind Bartimaeus are the only healing stories that demonstrate that Isaiah's promise has been fulfilled after the turning point in Mark's gospel when Peter announces who Jesus is and before the crucifixion. Jesus comes down from the Mountain where the inner circle of Peter, James, and John have seen him transfigured, with Elijah and Moses. Like Moses, people see Jesus bathed in light. Like Moses, Jesus returns to earth with a bump, to find God's people behaving badly.

The disciples make an easy mistake — not worshipping a golden calf, but worshipping themselves. They had been given authority to drive out evil (all that destroys us in mind, body or spirit), after Jesus's opening salvo against the demoniac in the synagogue that we looked at last time.

But the disciples have forgotten that they're to be a channel for the Spirit, not miracle-workers in their own right. It is by the Spirit that Jesus heals, not by arrogating authority to himself for himself. When people ask, 'Can I cure my wife, my friend, by prayer?' the answer is no. If the question is 'Can my prayers be a conduit for God's healing for my wife? My friend?' the answer is yes.

When Jesus says: 'This kind is hard, it comes out by prayer (fasting?)' he is not suggesting a technique we can practise successfully: he is saying that by praying, i.e. opening ourselves to God's possibilities and will, God's possibilities have a chance to enter into the situation. These will definitely be of the Spirit — and they may be incarnated in practical love, drugs, surgery, nursing, a bunch of grapes.

A man was stuck on his rooftop in a flood, praying to God for help. Soon a man in a boat came by and shouted up, 'Jump in, I can save you.' The man on the roof shouted back, 'No, it's OK, I'm praying to God and he's going to save me.' Then a motorboat came by and the woman shouted up to him, 'Jump in, I'll save you.' The man said, 'No thanks, I'm praying to God, and he is going to save me. I have faith.' Then a helicopter came by and the pilot shouted down, 'Grab this rope and I'll lift you to safety.' The man again replied, "No thanks, I'm praying to God and he is going to save me.'

Soon the water rose above the rooftop and the man drowned. He went to Heaven and finally got his chance to meet God, and exclaimed: 'I had faith in you. but you didn't save me, you let me drown! I don't understand why.' You're clever enough to get the point of this story.

Second: all of us are healed and brought home because God gave himself up to rejection and death in his alienated world. Mark's alert readers may read this story and think: 'Ah, there's a loving father here, concerned about his child who is being physically destroyed by the evil one, and he's appealing to a Son to rescue him.' Again, the alert among you may pick up little hints at resurrection, as Jesus takes the child by the hand and raises him up.

Mark is not giving us a first-century take on the proper treatment of epilepsy. This story is about the good news for all of us: although we are made of perishable stuff, we are destined for glory. We are dust, but beloved dust, which is the message of Ash Wednesday.

The third question we can get stuck on is about faith. The disciples don't have enough of it, apparently. The father in the story questions his own faith, but does the right thing: he asks Jesus to help him. That's all the faith you need. He opens himself up to Jesus and that's what enables Jesus to act.

The faith thing can scare a lot of people, me included. What if I don't have enough faith to perform a miracle? I'm too scared to pray in case I fail. Even worse, If my wife, my son, my friend dies, does that mean I didn't have enough faith? I have failed. Only one patient in my time at the hospice ever left that building alive, and I certainly prayed for a few. That's a serious misreading. In the same way that we mustn't take prayer as technique to impose our own will in any given situation, or prayer and fasting as emotional blackmail to make God do what we ask, faith is not a commodity that if we only get enough of, we can achieve this or that outcome. Faith – *pistis* – is such a dynamic noun you'd be better off thinking of it as a verb – believing, trusting, clinging to God, as blindly as a newborn baby monkey clings to its mother. It's believing *in*, *trusting in* – not believing *that* – like the man on the roof, who believed OK, but too literally, expecting the skies to open and a divine hand to reach down to scoop him off the roof and place him safely in Nether Wallop or Emery Down or wherever dry land was.

When we pray for healing for ourselves or the people we love or people on the news, we *are* turning to God, asking his will to be done, and he cannot fail to answer that prayer with a yes. Keep on faithing, and like any muscle in use, it will grow stronger. And if we don't get the result we hope for, we continue to trust – by the gift of the Holy Spirit in our hearts — dizzily hard though this is – that love defeated the forces of destruction even as they destroyed embodied love on the cross. To proclaim the resurrection is to assure the world that the spirit of love is still reconciling, restoring, acting, patiently, surely, to bring us all home to the Father's heart where we belong.

Jairus's daughter and the woman with the hemorrhage

Judges 13

Mark 5

My husband told me once that, for him, this story is the gospel in a nutshell. It shows us how Jesus heals and brings to life again the most vulnerable in the world, and with such tenderness. That is good news for all, especially women and children.

But we mustn't be sentimental about it, or miss Mark's meaning, because Mark (and Luke and Matthew) weren't teaching only women with dysmenorrhea and dead children. As we've seen before, the healing stories are really parables, riddles, offered to each one of us who really longs to learn, to be a disciple, to grow like Jesus. Mark's lesson that disciples can see a literal meaning but miss the deep meaning is embedded in so many of the stories, when they say something obviously crass: 'Why do you ask who touched you?' In Mark's gospel, Jesus is constantly challenging us to rise up out of our material/self-obsessed ways of thinking and catch the divine mystery playing out in our time.

So now: in all three synoptic gospels we have these two stories, one nested within the other, but there are differences, because each writer uses them to teach something different. Still, they share an affinity with other stories. There's a pattern. Earlier, we read Mark's story about a father who is distracted about a beloved son who has been possessed by a life-threatening spirit since childhood, and who begs Jesus to drive out the demon. 'There was no other good enough to pay the price of sin, he only could unlock the gate of heaven and let us in.'

The father in this story — he is a ruler — Jairus (literally 'bringer of light') knows that his daughter is dying. He worships Jesus and begs him to lay his hands on her. Jesus's healing power here must be incarnated — he must come, he must touch so that she may be healed and live. And Jesus agrees. And he announces the greatest news humanity can hear about itself: the child is not dead but sleeping.

Some mock him but in the presence of the closest disciples and the girl's mother and father (make of this what you will), Jesus takes her by the hand and raises her up, and orders that she is fed. This is important. And Mark adds that she is 12 years of age: Mark consistently uses the number 12 in connection with disciples. If the little girl represents humanity, the woman, who is acknowledged by Jesus as his own daughter, represents Israel, dying from the meagre diet the religious men of Jerusalem have offered while they themselves have grown fat.

Within this story of the child's healing, there is another, about someone who for 12 years has been a disciple of ineffective healers who have bled her dry for their own gain (guess who Mark means by that). But she's heard about Jesus and is now following him – coming up behind him. She is not dying, but her lifeblood is ebbing away and she'd barren. It will be enough to touch Jesus's garments. (Garments symbolise the spirit /wisdom in biblical stories.) As Mark told us in the story we read last time, faith/trust in Jesus is what allows him to change everything.

We have thought about the anxieties that prayers for healing may arouse: will they work and what happens if they don't? Does it mean that I'm failing, or haven't got the right amount of faith, or I'm not praying right? Mark tells us again: it's not about us; it's not about technique; it's not about cure. It's about allowing the Holy Spirit through Jesus to make good our lack —

whatever that lack is. Jesus can tell his new disciple truly that it's her trust that has made her well — not because she mastered the art of positive thinking or self-reliance. Rather the opposite: having come to the end of her own resources, she turned to her only source of salvation.

Another very practical worry people have about the sacrament of healing is what will it be like? Just how embarrassing? The Church of England has a prayer for the laying on of hands. 'In the name of Jesus Christ, and trusting in his might alone, receive Christ's healing touch to make you whole.' This prayer can be made for anyone anywhere, but it is specially appropriate during Holy Communion where we're fed by Jesus and the Spirit in word and sacrament. The touch of any priest, however unworthy, reflects the incarnation: it's the visible sign of God's invisible grace.

Is this a selfish thing to ask for? No, because we are not asking for, or expecting the eternal continuance of self — and you won't be quizzed why you are asking for healing. (If anyone asked me that, I'd have to ask, 'how long have we got?') No, just as the healing in these stories leads to very visible fruitfulness (the child is of marriagable age, and the woman will now be able to conceive and nurture children) our healing is to bear fruit for God. St Irenaeus said: 'The glory of God is a person fully alive.' And to be fully alive is to bring life to others.

Some of my unforgettable hospice patients were on an exponential learning curve as they were dying, and the effect this had on the people around them was remarkable and lasting. So to end at the beginning — a little phrase from the Samson story: out of the strong came forth sweetness. Remember that from the Tate and Lyle Golden Syrup tin, with the picture of the dead lion and the bees? Like the grain of wheat that falls to the ground and dies, like the mustard seed, like Jesus, even in our dying, if we are whole, we will bring life to others.

The paralytic's descent and rising

Isaiah 37

Mark 2.1-12 (Matthew 9.2-8; Luke 5.18-26)

It's very easy for preachers to get distracted by the comedy in this story: the sudden scrabbling overhead and the sight of a mattress swaying uncertainly down into an already packed room. Then we may be puzzled by the strange question: 'Is it easier to say "Your sins are forgiven" or to say "Stand up, and take your bed, and walk"?' Does it mean easy in the lexical sense, or in the moral or practical sense? In this particular story, some of the frequently asked questions arise: Can I pray for someone who has no faith, or who can't pray for themselves? Is healing instantaneous? Is to be healed the same as being forgiven — and does that mean that illness is really sinfulness? Can I pray legitimately for someone who has died?

The story doesn't seem quite so comedic if we can pick up the echoes of death and burial in the way Mark suggests. The gospel writers often speak of 'reclining ones', which can mean people reclining to eat, but which is also the same idiom for corpses laid out on a bier. We sound the depth of these gospel stories if we read them in that post-mortem sense. If you've ever watched a coffin being lowered by straps into a grave, you'll immediately pick up Mark's subtext here, and the idea of *digging* through the roof is a bit of a giveaway. That the man on the mattress is paralysed might also be a clue: this is someone who is dead, or as good as dead.

The man 'rises' at Jesus's command. No wonder Mark gives the reaction of the surrounding crowd as glorifying God and saying, 'We have never seen anything like this!' This story is not just an account of Jesus's ability as a faith healer. It is both something radically new, embodied before their eyes, like the appearances of Jesus after his own resurrection from the dead, but also recognisable from the patterns of God's destruction and renewal in their scriptures.

So we have to be careful not to get too distracted by the paralytic himself — though maybe we identify ourselves with him. We're apt to read the gospels as if they are all about us, whereas they are really all about Jesus *for* us. Jesus is showing us what the resurrection life with him is like — that it's a reality, and it has to do with our whole being, body, mind and spirit, and it brings liberation and life to what in ourselves is bed-bound or moribund. This is the Good News of Jesus, which we can appropriate for ourselves, if we turn to him and follow him.

The clause in the creed about the 'communion of the saints' follows from this and other parables and stories in the Bible. Yes, we *may* pray for others . . . but that prayer is derived from Jesus's own authority, which is a gift of the Spirit. Having said that, it's not a quantitative measure, as we've seen before ('Lord, I believe — help thou my unbelief') but a qualitative measure. The woman with the haemorrhage at last correctly identifies the source of healing and only needs to touch it. That is why the sacrament of laying on of hands contains the words, 'in the name of Jesus Christ, and trusting in his might alone, receive his touch to make you whole'. It is not — repeat *not* — to suggest that medicine or surgery is not part of the healing process, but that if we're willing to be vulnerable, receptive, and wholly truthful before Jesus and reach out to him, the Spirit may address whatever in us is paralysing us.

Is this depth of healing instantaneous? As with all work of the Spirit, the answer is yes and no. Yes — Jesus's saving death and resurrection is primordial; the moment we recognise our own

need of God's love, we receive it because it predates us. No, in that the Spirit's work is accomplished in our individual lives through nature and nurture, our gifts, weaknesses, our maturing and death — our final healing and liberation from the Kingdom of this world into the Kingdom of God.

And can we pray for others? Even if they have already died, or died to us? The New Testament writings suggest that this is very much the work of the saints, and the disciples are enjoined to preach, teach, and heal the living, to bring them to the source of life, which is Jesus, where all their needs can be met. I haven't spoken much about the healing of relationships, but anger, guilt, isolation, and grief can have a profound effect on our health, mental and physical. These effects don't stop just because someone has died, so there are relationships that transcend death. What do we do about them? Only the Mormon Church takes it to the extreme of actually baptising people thought to have died unbaptised. The Churches all teach that our agency only lasts with our physical existence on earth, but the Catholic Churches allow for the agency of love, and you don't have to construct a system like purgatory (which has been recently revised by the Roman Catholic Church) to feel the Spirit praying within you for anyone you love, living or dead. Logically, if we all exist in God, who is beyond time, then the healing of relationships may be effected by love channelled through us, even if reconciliation with someone hasn't happened in their lifetime. This is the gospel for everyone who is paralysed by grief.

And is to be ill or paralysed the same thing as being sinful? If we read the gospels attentively, we don't make this cruel mistake. We come to see that it is our mortality, bound to Satan, that Jesus comes to free. Mortality is a universal human condition which expresses itself in all kinds of physical and spiritual suffering.

It is the root of the doctrine of 'original sin'. We are dust, and to dust returning. But we know that we are held within the love of God, and that knowledge is the source of all our hope and wholeness — or what we know as 'healing'. What God loves, God will not destroy. Within God's love, we will be remade in the likeness we bear in such diverse and unlikely fashionings. The Spirit is known to us as the source of healing, reconciliation, harmony and peace, given a human face and touch in Jesus. As we turn to Jesus, a visible, knowable saviour, we open ourselves to the invisible, unknowable power of the Spirit to raise us up, unbind us from all that imprisons us, and we walk into our place within the life of God.

A postscript: the healing work of all the Church's people

Although sacramental healing, like other sacraments, is offered by ordained priests, Fr Thomas Skeats speaks elegantly about the way the Church as a whole is a sacrament, and the Church is made up of every member of Christ's body:

'One way we can think about the Church is as the "Sacrament of Christ" — the Church, in other words, as the sign (pointing us towards) and the reality of Christ's presence and power extended in space and time. The Church is not merely a group of people who come together to reflect on what Jesus did in the past; it is not merely a group of people who agree on certain moral or social issues, and who try to be nice to one another. The community of the Church, filled with the Holy Spirit, is the visible sign by which and through which Our Lord Jesus Christ continues to minister to his people and to bring his healing.

'This means that when a person is baptised, it is Christ who baptises. When the Word of God is proclaimed at Mass, it is the Lord Jesus Christ who speaks to us. When the Eucharist is celebrated, Jesus's presence and saving death are extended to us. And [in acts of healing] it is Jesus Christ our divine physician acting through his Church who touches us and brings his healing.

'The acts of healing of the sick that is such a major part of Christ's work in the Gospels are anticipations of the new creation that Christ came to inaugurate and in which physical and spiritual torments will be no more. This healing ministry is continued after the Ascension of Jesus Christ through the instrumentality of the Church, as we see, for example, in the Acts of the Apostles. It is still Christ's divine power at work, but the effects of that power are brought about instrumentally through, for instance, the sacraments and the intercession of the saints...

'When we practise Christian charity, we are like the saints acting as instruments of Jesus Christ. It is a marvellous thing that we who ourselves need to be healed are called to participate in and extend Christ's healing to others.'

Thomas Skeats OP

The intercession of the saints means more to us than the officially canonized saints in heaven: it is the prayers of all God's people for one another — the network of love which brings us all into 'the Communion of Saints' we speak of in the Creed. It is also the invisible grace made visible in the healing wrought by the offer of a cup of coffee, time to listen, a lift, singing together, praying together, celebrating and eating together. We are herd animals and we thrive only when we find 'our tribe', something that we read of in the climax of Christ's vision in The Book of Revelation, when people from all nations, all singing praise to God and the Lamb, are safe within the walls of the New Jerusalem. Every gathering for worship on earth should be a present realisation of that health-giving joy, safety and unity.