

Sunday 20th October – St Luke

Isaiah 35.3-6

2 Timothy 4:5-17

Luke 10.1-9

A few weeks ago in our sermon series on the Creed I preached at St Johns and Christ the King on the Resurrection of the dead – everlasting life, and reflected on a funeral service that I had attended just a couple of days before – the funeral of a friend that I had known for around 25 years.

My friend Jon was just a few years older than me, but 10 or 12 years ago he developed dementia. He had been struggling with it ever since as his health, slowly at times, more speedily at other times, deteriorated. The dementia finally claimed his life. The funeral service was a celebration of his life – his widow shared some moving and poignant memories of the good and joyful times and also the sad and difficult times. We laughed and we cried.

But the service also celebrated Jon's faith – his faith in Jesus, the Resurrection and the Life. A faith that recognised death, but also rejoiced in everlasting life, fullness of life. Resurrection.

This poem by Gerard Kelly was read. It acknowledges the sadness and reality of Jon's dementia, but also anticipated the quality and joy of everlasting resurrection life.

*it was a marvellous healing;
after the months of asking,
of waiting;
after the desperate, slow deterioration,
the warring tides
of faith and doubt:
to be released in an instant,
from every pain.
it was as if the very molecules of his flesh
had been infused, invaded,
with the life of God,
until he was filled, fit to burst,
with the Shalom, the peace,
of the Father's rule.
limbs that had fallen flaccid with weakness
waved and danced with joy;
lungs that had so utterly failed him
sang out with strength and boldness.*

*he ran
through the unfamiliar sunlight,
drinking it in,
experiencing all at once
the thousand and one feelings
that for so long had been denied him.*

*it was a marvellous healing:
to be so totally restored,
made whole,
rebuilt.
it had just surprised him,
a little,
that he had had to die
to receive it.*

It's a similar message to the one I often preach at funerals – that everlasting life is about healing. When all the wrongs, all the restrictions, all the pains and sorrows and regrets and heartaches of this life are left behind. A chance for us to leap and dance and sing and shout with all the energy and excitement that we can imagine as we are restored to wholeness in body, mind and spirit.

And that is of course one way of looking at the reading we had this morning from the prophet Isaiah - one of a number in the OT prophets about the coming of the day of the Lord – when everything would be put right. When the blind would see, the deaf hear, the lame dance and the dumb sing for joy.

But we see in the life and ministry of Jesus that there is healing now. In this life. That people are healed physically, emotionally and spiritually now. Its not just for the future.

Those 70 disciples who Jesus sent out in pairs were, amongst other instructions, told to cure the sick as they proclaimed the Kingdom. Similar exhortations appear in the new testament letters – exhortations on us to lay hands on people who are ill or suffering, to anoint them and pray for healing and wholeness. Which is why we do that today and why we will do that later in this service.

We read the gospel stories and we rejoice at the wonderful things that took place at the hands and word of Jesus. As Isaiah prophesied, the blind seeing, the deaf hearing, lame leaping and dead coming back to life.

If we had continued reading in Luke's gospel about those 70 disciples Jesus sent out we would have heard that they came back rejoicing for the sick had indeed been healed. And we read in the Acts of the apostles about amazing healings.

And we hear of such things today. Perhaps you know of people who have been healed in some amazing way following prayer – maybe its your own experience. I know that there are people in our churches who have experienced this and – I know too that I have seen people healed after I have prayed with them such is the power of God.

We call such things miracles – miraculous because they go against the normal things of nature and are as such unusual – they don't happen very often.

But the truth is that more often – probably usually - when we pray things don't seem to change. We remain ill. The healing doesn't come. We pray and our prayers don't seem to be answered – at least in the way we would want.

Does this mean we haven't prayed enough, or we haven't got enough faith? Does it mean that God isn't pleased with us, that we have done something wrong?

I want to read some words written by someone called Jenny Rowbury, who has suffered far more and for far longer than most – she has had severe ME and vascular EDS for around 20 years – almost half of her life. She is in constant, agonising pain, unable to sit up or talk or hardly move, isolated in darkness, her body unable to tolerate even a whisper of noise without it causing her severe pain. She is also a Christian who has walked with God through this pain, and who has prayed and prayed that the pain be taken away and she be healed. But to no avail. She wrote these words 6 years ago. Her condition has worsened since then, but she still holds to the words.

'I've been living with the realities of the non-intervening side of God for over fourteen years. It doesn't get easier but I've also realised that my expectations were skewed by so much Christian teaching – that God always saves or rescues you and intervenes when you need it most and when you pray hard and passionately. None of this is actually promised in the Bible but, before becoming ill, I heard this preached so often.

People seem to need to believe that God will intervene in desperate situations for them, even though when looking at the world, you can see that's not the case in most instances. It's very rare that miracles happen.

All God promises is to be with us always, even if we can't sense it or experience it in a tangible way. Getting to know the God who does not save, who does not help in the way that I want, has been both excruciating and, on the rare occasion when I feel God so close, his hand on my shoulder, that I can feel what he's feeling and pick up a small slice of what he's thinking towards me, it's breathtaking and melts you, resting in that communing moment together. It doesn't change the desperate situation you're in, it doesn't help in any way that you're needing or wanting but it's what's there.

What strikes me is how vulnerable God makes himself. He risks losing people he loves and risks us ending up hating him when we feel so hurt by him when he doesn't intervene or protect us in the way even any earthly loving parent would.

I don't think he's testing us and he definitely doesn't want us in pain or any cruel nonsense like that. Instead, there's the intense vulnerability of whether we'll still love him back for who he is, not for what he does and whether we'll still see the good in him. It might take a long time to get there and a lot of anger, hurt and feeling betrayed, which must be painful for him, but he just absorbs it while we wrestle with it all.

There is something special though when we do see his goodness and still love him, despite our anguish and what we perceive as his lack of action, and I think that melts him. This has been my experience.'

Amazing words indeed from someone who has a deep knowledge both of pain and seemingly unanswered prayer.

But as Jenny says – what God does promise is that he will be with us in the suffering, in the painful situations we find ourselves, in the despair, in the dark place. And that presence can make all the difference.

Yes, sometimes, and we cannot explain why, sometimes healing might come. But more often the reality is that it won't.

But that doesn't mean we shouldn't pray. Pray for healing if it be God's will; but pray more for wholeness – peace – being able to cope with the situation – pray for the presence, the reassuring and loving presence of God alongside us in our pain, loving arms around us and supporting us.

When I was a child, if I hurt myself, or someone at school hurt me by what they said or did, I used to go to my Mum. I knew she couldn't change the situation. My cut

knee would still throb; the names I was called would still hurt, but I would know that she was there alongside me. Understanding my hurt, knowing my pain. And I would always feel better able to cope because of it.

Today when we pray for you we will pray for wholeness, for God's loving presence. This includes physical healing – if that's what you are asking for – but its more about wholeness - a restored and right relationship with your loving God, who promises to be alongside you day by day. Whatever and without fail. And most of all, a knowledge of and experience of his presence with you.