

Year C, Proper 4

1 Kings 8:22-23, 41-43. Psalm 96:1-9. Galatians 1:1-12. Luke 7:1-10.

This morning's reading from Hebrew Scripture commands ministry to outsiders, not just to members of the club. That message also comes across in Paul's letter to the Galatians. Paul is gravely disappointed that the Galatians should have been foolish enough to listen to people who said that only Jews – that is club members – would be saved. He is very cross – incandescent I'd say – that he has to tell them *again* that that isn't the case. And in the Gospel, we see Jesus healing an outsider. An outsider of outsiders, in a way: not a Jew, not even a Roman, but the servant of a Roman. The servant could have been from anywhere. That theme, that Christianity is for all, not just the chosen elite, is something that all churches need to take seriously: as we welcome people, as we give out notices—it's easy to assume if I say 'tell the Wardens' that people will know who the Wardens are, as I'm greeting people before and after services. It's easy for us to fall into chatting with people we know, and ignore those we don't. We've talked about that before, and doubtless will again. But not today. Today I want to consider healing itself.

We say medicine is about the relief of suffering. In Christianity, and I suspect in many of our childhood experiences, there's always been something of a suffering-is-good-for-you masochism. *It'll make a man of you.* Sportsmen proudly bearing their scars as a token of 'hardness'. Some Christians seem to glory in suffering. Their aim is not to avoid pain but to embrace it. And I suspect we all know people who make a virtue of enjoying ill health. 'After all', they say sanctimoniously, 'Jesus knowingly goes to the cross, and in this suffering I'm imitating Our Lord, present alongside those who suffer'. This is not a view I'm keen on myself. My idea of suffering is running out of ice cubes. The logical position for these people would be to eschew antibiotics, elastoplasts, pain-killers, hip replacements. And the rest.

Other faiths are more sensible than some Christians. Members of other Abrahamic faiths have no problem with alleviating suffering, accepting contraception when a pregnancy is likely to threaten a woman's health, even the killing of the unborn in certain circumstances. Jewish writers denounce the glorification of suffering, and even prefer to forego future reward if it involves present agony. So let's not kid ourselves that we need to be miserable, despite the emphasis on the suffering servanthood of Christ that is pushed by some branches of Christianity.

Let's consider healing. As I've said before, healing is *not* about cure. After all, we're all going to die sooner or later, and there is no cure of that. Medical cure today of one disease simply means that we'll die tomorrow of something else. Not recognizing that is one reason why so much money is poured into the health services; why doctors are so well-funded by the folly of patients who think that they should live for ever; why people pay for unnecessary plastic surgery and cosmetics; why people obsess about their appearance. This obsession with perfect health and appearance is saying that we are intolerant of imperfection and disability. I speak with some insight here: there was a time when I spent money on gym memberships in the quest for some physical ideal. You can see how far I have fallen short, and how that money was wasted. We are all afflicted to some degree or other. But the quest for perfection and immortality is, I think, a perversion by satanic elements in our culture of a perfectly reasonable spiritual quest for wholeness.

Surely, that's what healing is about: *the quest for wholeness*. Here are some other words and ideas that mean the same: salving, restoring integrity, soothing, and the one I like best: coming to terms with the situation we're in. When we have come to terms with our situation, we *do* feel better, we know we need to ask for help, and that is itself a form of healing. At the bedside, I often pray that we will have grace to bear what must be borne, and patience to cooperate with the healing process.

In today's Gospel, it's easily missed that the centurion and Jesus never actually met. It's healing from afar. You could say that Jesus did nothing, because by the time he was told of the servant's condition, the centurion had already sent out messengers to say that the servant was healed, so Jesus needn't go any further. It seems to indicate that healing began as soon as the need for it was acknowledged. I think this is absolutely true. When I realize that I have a cold, or manflu or whatever, I can relax a bit and accept the fact that I won't be able to do this or that or the other. And concentrate on resting to allow biological healing processes. It's as if the healing process is locked away inside us and can't begin until we consciously realize that we need to let it start working.

We don't need to hide our broken-ness. At the Eucharist, there's great significance in one little act immediately after the Lord's Prayer. *The bread which we break is a sharing in the body of Christ.* It was the wounds to Jesus' body that did the healing work. We don't need to pretend we're perfect. We are human: we can *never* be perfect. It's our imperfections that help us to understand one other. When we see someone else's faults, and that they acknowledge them, we feel more kindly disposed to them. This is the first stage of healing. This is why people who never acknowledge their mistakes are so scorned. Why spin doctors are reviled. I view it as one of my tasks to make plain my faults for all to see. Some

people want their ministers to be perfect. Good luck with that one. Let's put aside any facade of perfection, and acknowledge that we all need healing from something: childhood hurts; or resentments that we refuse to let go; or addictions to attitudes, to chemicals, to ways of behaving. We need healing from all the things that are thieves of our true selves.

In hospitals, patients tell me their secrets. They whisper them to me, and we talk about them. They smile nervously as they do so. And then I can see them sinking back into their pillows. I can see the relief. This is a *coming to terms* operation. It's a *setting down the load* operation. It's an acceptance of who they are, and when they see that they are not condemned for being who they are, it's a healing.

You and I are human. We have no need to pretend to be anything else. In the Christian way of thinking, our humanity was raised to the level of the Divine at the Ascension. *Made like him, like him we rise.* We begin to be healed when we accept our need for healing. Just like the centurion and his servant.