

James 5: 13 –end**Mark 9:38-end****Introduction**

In the early summer we ran a series of sermons about healing and wholeness and in August we started offering services of wholeness and healing across the Benefice. We plan to offer this monthly in different churches but we are still in very early days and are still wondering Whether it is best to offer on Sundays or in midweek. On 17th October there will be a service of wholeness and healing at Shepreth so I wanted to say a bit more about the ministry of healing and why I think it is important.

So I am going to ask – and try to answer some questions about it.

1. Why do we want to have prayer for healing as part of our worship?

There are two main reasons: The first being that the Bible tells us to. In our reading from the Epistle of James that we heard earlier it says, "Is any one of you sick? He should call the elders of the church to pray over him." Illness and weakness is not simply a private matter, although most of us prefer it that way. But if we are part of the church, the body of Christ it is a concern for the whole body. Not that we advertise it widely or that we have a right to know about each other's problems but that if one of us is ill if we love each other we should be concerned and it does affect the whole body. So James tells us that when we are unwell we should ask the elders of the church, as representatives of the whole body of Christ, to pray for our healing, and on occasions, to anoint with oil.

In the Anglican church we tend to reserve anointing for specific occasions, where people have the opportunity to prepare themselves by confessing their sins. It is part of the ministry of healing but in our services of wholeness and healing we simply offer the laying on of hands and prayer.

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The second reason we pray for healing is that healing was and clearly is one of Jesus's priorities. As we read the Gospels we see that Jesus was concerned with the needs of the people that came to him. And where their need was an illness, or a weakness he responded by healing them.

There isn't a single recorded incident where somebody came to Jesus with a need for healing and was turned away. He always responded and he always healed, whether the need was a physical one such as blindness or lameness; whether it was spiritual, such as a need for forgiveness of sin and failure; whether it was mental, where the person needed healing of emotional hurts Jesus always responded, he always helped. Of course we will not be completely free of illness or weakness in this life but such things are not inevitable or God's plan for us and part of the establishing of God's Kingdom on earth is in the healing of God's people. Jesus healed when he lived on earth and he still heals today through his Holy Spirit.

I believe it is no accident that the Greek Word σωζο that we translate save, also means to save from peril, injury or suffering and refers to healing and the restoration of health. Jesus came to save sinners but he also heals sinners. If we only come to him for forgiveness of our sins we are missing out on half of what he wants to do for us. The word σωζο sums up Jesus's redeeming activity and that is described to us clearly in Isaiah 53:4-5

⁴ *Surely he has borne our infirmities
and carried our diseases;
yet we accounted him stricken,
struck down by God, and afflicted.*

⁵ *But he was wounded for our transgressions,
crushed for our iniquities;*

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*upon him was the punishment that made us whole,
and by his bruises we are healed.*

And Psalm 103:3-4

who forgives all your iniquity,

who heals all your diseases,

⁴ *who redeems your life from the Pit,*

who crowns you with steadfast love and mercy,

As Christ's body, the church we equally need to come to Jesus for forgiveness of sin and for healing of our lives.

So who is the healing ministry for?

Well the short answer is anyone – and it should, in fact , be everyone. Each and every one of us needs healing in some way whether it is physical, spiritual or emotional. And each of us can, and in fact should, ask Jesus for healing. We may feel that our individual need is not important and that we would feel presumptuous asking for someone to pray for us. Or it may be that we have had a particular problem or difficulty or illness so long that it is almost a part of us so that we don't notice that it is a problem or is dragging us down. I think it can be really helpful if, like our cars, we have a regular MOT and perhaps ask God if there is something in our lives that he wants to deal with, or change, or heal – and it may be something we are completely unaware of.

Last year, having delayed servicing my car because of the pandemic I noticed it had developed a high pitched whine. When I took it to the garage I discovered that my brake pads were almost entirely bare. I had no idea my car was sick, and sometime we are unaware of our own needs.

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Jesus's promise to us is clear. He said, "Come unto me all you who labour and are heavy laden and I will give you rest." So many of us carry around burdens that God never intended us to carry simply because it has never occurred to us that God might want to deal with them, to heal them.

What are the things that might stop us coming to ask for prayer for healing?

There are quite a few things that can hold us back. One of the first things is fear. We may be afraid to ask and feel conspicuous going to a service that offers prayer for healing. It can be very hard to admit that we have a need and if we went to a service for healing it might feel very public, especially if we then go forward to be prayed for. It's easy to feel that people are noting we are there and making judgements, "What's wrong with him? Or she's got a problem I might have guessed. The fact is that in our services most people are praying and listening to the music or to God speaking to them. Most of us aren't looking out and judging but it can feel like that. It is also true that knowing that someone else has admitted a need can give us the courage to come forward and ask for prayer for ourselves.

We may also feel that we have asked for prayer before and we cannot ask again; either for the same thing or for another need. We can feel that it is selfish or greedy to ask again. But when our children come to us with a need we don't say to them, 'I'm sorry you've had my help once. I'm not helping you again'. We are delighted that they share their needs with us and trust us to help them,. God's grace is unlimited. He doesn't ration it out; a small amount for you, a small amount for you. His grace and power are a bottomless well. There is enough

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and more for everyone. We do not need to be afraid that we will ever exhaust God's strength and compassion; both are beyond our wildest dreams. God's wish for us is that we should be perfect and complete and he will not be satisfied until we are. We will not be completely whole in this life but God wants us to be a great deal more complete than we are now. His resources are unlimited and we can ask again and again and again. In fact Jesus, in his teaching encourages us to persevere in our praying, to keep on asking for the things we need.

As we slowly begin offering prayer for healing in our churches can I ask you to do two things. Firstly to mention it to the people that you know who might be unwell, or anxious, or generally struggling with life – and if necessary offer to come with them to a service especially if they aren't a regular churchgoer. The pandemic has put an enormous strain on all of us. Even if we haven't had covid it has taken its toll in terms of loneliness and isolation, of anxiety, of financial and personal worries. Many of us are bruised and need to know God's love and care. Suggest to someone that they come to church to ask for God's special touch on their lives – you might be surprised by their response. And can I ask you to pray for this ministry, that it will change people's lives and help people to know that God is not only concerned for them but can also change their lives.

James said to his hearers, "The prayers of a righteous man are powerful and effective." (It also applies to women!) He goes on to talk about the way that Elijah's earnest praying was able to prevent it from raining for three years. God listens to his people. He wants us to take our needs and concerns to him and he wants us to pray for each other. Your prayers are

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effective, they are important, and they do matter. If we as a church are to be effective in sharing the message of God's love and healing to the people in the village where we live we need every member to be praying for our community and for those who lead the church, who visit the community, who pray for others at the healing services.

God loves us. He wants the best for each of us and he wants us to bring our needs to him so that he can change us and heal us and renew us. And to finish some words from Paul's letter to the Ephesians

^o Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, ²¹ to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.