

St Luke: There is balm in Gilead, there is a physician there

Sermon for St Luke's Day, Sunday 18 October 2020

St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor ACT, Australia

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Jeremiah 8: 22 – 9:3; Psalm 145: 10-18; 2 Timothy 4:9-17a; Luke 10: 1-9

+In the Name of the Father & of the Son & of the Holy Spirit. AMEN.

Two years ago I experienced some of the healing that we look to today as we commemorate St Luke the physician. I had what they call a bilateral knee replacement, where they cut out two worn-out knees, with their bone grinding on bone, and bolt in shiny new medical miracles of ceramic and titanium. Once the rehab and the strong painkillers were past, and the new equipment settled into the old bones, the relief was enormous. I felt that I'd got my body and my bodily strength back, after ten years of more or less constant pain and deteriorating mobility. I can go hiking now and can easily negotiate stairs, both up *and* down—which used to be much harder. I can very nearly genuflect again, too, and though I can't really run any more (because artificial knees don't have

any shock absorption) I sometimes dream that I'm running, and I wake up exhilarated.

The joy of this deliverance is one face of healing, and I thank God for it even though the surgeon and the physios and the health fund were God's agents in the matter. This recovery didn't come as some Christians expect, however: as a miraculous healing apart from any human involvement. The Roman Catholic Church insists on two healing miracles before they'll recognise someone as a saint, yet they still run thousands of hospitals worldwide, believing that God typically prefers to work through human agents.

But healing has another face, real but demanding. God also brings us healing in the form of courage, patience and grace in the midst of illness and debility, even if we don't get better. God helps us to live bravely and give witness to our faith and, if we die, to do so at peace with God, with the world, and with ourselves.

There are many who resist what I'm saying here. They can't see anything positive in facing the challenges of illness and injury, nor in the often-lengthy process of recovery. For them, being healed is confined to being cured, with a cure or not getting sick in the first place often seen as a sign of God's special favour. Donald Trump clearly thinks so, having gotten over COVID really easily. I'd say he's just got excellent genes, and that he's statistically fortunate, given that he does no exercise and lives only on cheeseburgers—I guess because you can hold a cheeseburger in one hand while you tweet with the other! His idea is obviously that being physically able makes you a winner while being disabled, either temporarily or permanently, makes you a loser.

But then there are so many others with exceptional ability and promise who have no such good fortune. On ABC Classic this week, the mornings program featured recordings by the cellist Jacqueline du Pré who, with her equally glamorous young husband, the pianist Daniel Barenboim, electrified the classical music world. Her famous recording of the Elgar Cello Concerto with Sir John Barbirolli and the London Symphony is

still widely regarded as definitive fifty-five years on. Yet at 28 Jacqueline du Pré contracted multiple sclerosis, and apart from a few early remissions when she could get in and make a recording, her musical career was over and, 14 years later, so was her life.

Many of us struggle with these uncomfortable realities, and wonder what God's up to, letting the undeserving flourish while the worthwhile and promising are cut down. The Bible asks the same questions, and sometimes believers give truly dreadful answers, with some choosing to blame the victims. A charismatic Christian once told a priest friend of mine that his daughter's Down's Syndrome was God's punishment for his lack of faith. To be honest you do find this sort of thinking in the Bible, from a world where no-one distinguished divine agency from natural agency. But that's not the central biblical approach to healing.

The Bible recognises that sickness and health are best approached holistically, and not primarily as the individual matter that modern medicine takes it to be. Jeremiah in our

first reading today sees Israel's national malaise as a result of its abandoning God, which drew from him the heartfelt lament 'Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there'? The writer to Timothy today is in the midst of a major Church conflict and it's all very angry and jumbled: he names names, and his frustrated talk of payback is mixed with practical instructions, like bringing the cloak he left behind, all concluding with a testimony to God's faithfulness. Luke the physician is mentioned as the embattled writer's one constant support—this Luke rightly remembered as a physician of the soul. We recognise that dysfunction in the community has consequences for individuals who are caught up in it. This is something God takes seriously and works to overcome, through the efforts of people like Luke and the writer to Timothy. In other words, the Church is a place that God is calling and enabling to be spiritually healthy, and physicians are provided—there is balm in Gilead.

Which brings me to our Gospel today, which St Francis who we recently commemorated took quite literally, sending out the friars two by two to live in simple solidarity with local

communities, embodying the good news of God's love. The healing model here is to live modestly among the people, to draw alongside them with empathy, to help shoulder the community's burdens and only thus to gain a share in its joys. Religious communities committed to hospital and mental health care, including missionary orders and societies taking this embodied good news around the world, have followed this lead. So has the pastoral approach to Christian ministry, with a parish priest resident in every community.

Healing involves the life of communities coming right, and this requires both prophetic challenge and incarnate presence. God wants human beings to live in healthy relationship, calling the church to be a witness and agent and proving ground of this healing. And it's here that the connection between forgiveness and repentance and healing shows up clearly. We turn away from selfish and stupid and uncaring behaviours and attitudes, as we learn to be generous and compassionate then, lo and behold, people and situations change for the better. Those who resent the poor and others who they condemn as undeserving, as many in

America do today, show how a bad spiritual attitude leads to bad health outcomes. No wonder a sick society like America has become riddled with chronic physical illnesses, mental torment, endemic depression and widespread addictions.

We see, too, how pandemics can get away from us if our primary attitudes are selfish, careless and greedy, with money and wilful self-assertion deemed to be more important than the welfare of others. Look what happens in countries where that's the attitude, especially in so-called Bible-believing America—the land where it's only other people who are the sinners.

Friends, here in the Eucharist we receive what St Augustine called the medicine of immortality. This is nothing other than Jesus himself who in suffering solidarity in life and death, with the best and worst of humanity, changes the world and us with it. We live at a time when the environment is sick, societies are sick, and politics is sick, so that despite the widespread blessing of excellent health care there are many whose bodies and minds remain burdened, bearing the cost

of wider social dysfunction. Today, however, you and I can rejoice that there *is* balm in Gilead, that there *is* a physician there: chiefly Jesus himself but with him Luke, and many ordinary Christians called to share with God in loving the world back to health. May we who receive the medicine of immortality today, as individuals and as a parish, come to recognise and inhabit this therapeutic calling.

The Lord be with you ...