

SAINT THOMAS CHURCH

Fifth Avenue · New York City

Sunday February 4 2024

The Fifth Sunday After the Epiphany (Sexagesima)

Choral Mattins and Festal Eucharist

11 a.m.

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A Sermon by

The Rev. Alison J. Turner, *Associate for Children & Family Ministry and School Chaplain*

on

Mark 1:29-39

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Christ the Healer

“Simon's wife's mother lay sick of a fever.....And Jesus came and took her by the hand, and lifted her up; and immediately the fever left her, and she ministered unto them.”

-Mark 1: 30-31

I wonder what healing means to you?

It was a Saturday in late August 2010 when I took the train to Bristol Royal Infirmary. I went to see my old college friend Mark. He had only been sick, really sick, for a matter of weeks and I think we both knew this would be the last time we would spend together.

On my arrival he was propped up in bed wearing one of those somewhat flimsy hospital gowns, his arm bruised by multiple blood tests, and there was little sense of dignity in the situation. He had been waiting for a very long time in a small, basic cubicle with no privacy, except for a thin and equally flimsy curtain between him and the next patient. As a researcher and professor in medical ethics his work was deeply rooted in his Christian faith and centered on healing. He knew a lot about people, places, procedures and rituals that aided patients and families who were facing

difficult times, just as his family were now. Yet this empty and bare even soulless environment, all seemed far removed from the ideals of care he had shared with his students.

At first, we sat in silence as we held one another and cried, and then he asked me to pray. I remember thinking, What do you pray for someone when all medical interventions have been exhausted, for someone who knows they're going to die anytime soon? Prayers for a cure seemed impossible, prayers for healing less so. I cannot recall my words but remember during the visit just how calm he was, not from the drugs, or exhaustion but he had a deep peacefulness and acceptance about him, of one who knew he was beloved, by God and those who like me had been called to his bedside. I expect many of you have your Mark type stories.

A month later as I led his funeral in the crypt of Canterbury Cathedral, I heard the words of another friend who reflected back on Mark's disposition of compassion, and of acceptance throughout his life and especially in his *own vulnerability, his woundedness and recent suffering he was a lasting source of light and hope for others. In the hospital he uplifted us, he brought us healing in our anticipated grief, at a time when he had reflected*

on this recent hospital experience: 'I came here for healing but it wasn't what I expected.'

I wonder what Simon's unnamed mother-in-law expected that day Jesus came to her beside maybe just to pray with her? But no, he took her by the hand, and lifted her up; and immediately the fever left her.

In an era when perceptions of sin and sickness were intertwined so much so that those who were gravely ill were considered to be unclean, far from beloved, set aside from society. They had no stream of visitors at their bedside for fear of contamination.

In this dramatic account of healing, repeated in each of the synoptic gospels, Jesus a likely family friend, defied the norms of etiquette and cultural expectations of the day. He fearlessly casted out her fear, with compassion he bound up her wounds, as he raised her up with words of healing. He restored the possibility of her being included and reconciled with her community as a beloved child of God.

Jesus brought her healing that exceeded her expectations for wholeness. One that was not only physical and immediate but emotional and spiritual,

to which she responded immediately and gratefully, strengthened for service to minister to those in her midst, and to be a source of compassion, light and hope for others.

There have been many debates and documentaries on the mystery of healing.

You may have seen a very recent and somewhat secular film, *The Miracle Club*, wherein a group of women each win a ticket to go to Lourdes in the South of France, each carrying a hope for a cure at the grotto, and at the

baths where miracles have been recorded before.

One seeks healing for a lump in her breast, another has an issue with her leg, and another carries a hope that her child may gain his speech. They certainly do not want to believe the sentiment of a priest who says something like this, 'Don't expect a miracle, rather strength to cope when one doesn't come your way.'

However, as the story unfolds, and is often the experience of pilgrimage, this holy place immersed in prayer gradually reconnects them with the Divine and restores their relationships, wounds of traumatic memories are soothed, past decisions that have haunted their lives are named, mistakes are acknowledged.

While this is a fictional story it reflects the age-old fascination with the mystery of healing and a deep-rooted desire to seek wholeness in all its forms. Something I expect we all seek in our earthly life. This film reflects a common faith experience where human expectations about healing are shifted, and the miracle that does comes to fruition is rooted in a discovery that one is beloved by God.

In the 1980's in the Church of England there was a revival in healing ministry. Several Christian writers who had dedicated their lives to this ministry also became well known at this time, such as Dorothy Kerin author of *Called by Christ to heal*, who through her own personal experience of suffering and vulnerability, encountered Christ the Beloved and Wounded Healer. In her experience working with medics, therapists, carers and patients she adjusted her own expectations of healing, reframing a search for wholeness as one which involves and interconnects each and every part of our lives. Her healing practice, founded within a model of community, and conviction that all are Christ's beloved became more fully rooted in Christ's Divine compassion for all forms of human suffering, of individuals in trauma and communities who are suffering. For Henry Noumen,

"Compassion asks us to go where it hurts, to enter into the places of pain, to share in brokenness, fear, confusion, and anguish. Compassion challenges us to cry out with those in misery, to mourn with those who are lonely, to weep with those in tears. Compassion requires us to be weak with the weak, vulnerable with the vulnerable, and powerless with the powerless. Compassion means full immersion in the condition of being human."

As we immerse ourselves in the question of what it means to be a beloved community this month may we share his divine compassion with and for one another, may we participate more fully in Christ's healing work, beyond our expectations.

And in words often said during healing prayer each Sunday over here in the Chantry Chapel,

'May the Lord in his love and mercy
help us all with the grace of his Holy Spirit.
May the Lord, who frees us from our sin,
save us and raise us up.'