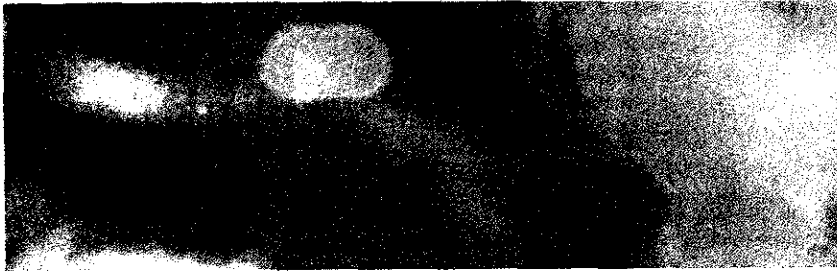


THE HEALING MINISTRY

In the first of a new six-part series, the Rev Tom Cunniff looks at the healing of the paralytic.



EVER since a series of 'divine nudges in the ribs' propelled me into the healing ministry about 20 years ago, I have felt instinctively drawn to the healing miracles of Jesus.

One, in particular, continues to fascinate me – the healing of the paralytic (St Mark 2 v1 – 12).

Can you imagine any doctor today walking into a hospital ward and saying to a patient totally paralysed by a stroke, 'Son, your sins are forgiven'? Yet these words of Jesus to the paralytic form the dynamic core of this healing story.

The incident described in the gospel is comical in the extreme. Thwarted by the density of the crowd the paralytic's friends execute a side-flanking move. Showing remarkable ingenuity and resourcefulness they scale the exterior stairway of the house with their stretcher-case and punch a hole through the layer of brushwood and dirt that constitutes the roof, and lay their friend at Jesus' feet (who, incidentally, must have been showered with debris as a result of this dramatic entrance from on high). However, Jesus is not side-tracked by this interruption. Rather he is the kind of teacher who possesses a flair for making what is happening at any particular moment the focus of his teaching. The paralytic is not a distracting diversion from the word of God: rather, his presence becomes the opportunity for a new word. A thought in the passing – bringing others to Jesus on the stretcher of our prayers belongs to the bedrock of Christian ministry.

To return to the core of this healing story, namely, Jesus' words to the paralytic, 'Son, your sins are forgiven' – we find that these words trigger a theological crisis. Not for the first time, and certainly not for the last, the scribes are scandalised (who but God can forgive sin?). In provocative fashion Jesus underlines his divine credentials.

What still intrigues me is why Jesus says 'Son, your sins are forgiven' to someone suffering from an overtly physical ailment.

What I believe is happening here is that Jesus has focussed with uncanny accuracy upon the real root cause of the man's paralysis. He senses that the man's illness is essentially spiritual: some form of guilt complex, some kind of spiritual poison is attacking his system and therefore perhaps causing the paralysis. So, he bypasses the

paralysis and homes in on the nub of the problem – 'Son, your sins are forgiven'. Liberated from the prison-house of his guilt, the man finds that he is also liberated from his paralysis!!

What is definitely not being implied here is that the sins of the paralytic were somehow the direct cause of his illness.

That would be tantamount to implying that his illness was a punishment for sin – a warped belief from which Jesus distanced himself totally (see St John 9). Rather the whole thrust of Jesus' ministry was to save, to heal the whole person, body, mind, soul, memory, emotions.

In my first parish I served as a part-time chaplain at the then Bangour Hospital. There was, as I recall, this patient who had undergone a series of unsuccessful skin grafts – somehow the healing processes had seized up. I got to know the patient quite well. One day he was suddenly stricken with what can only be described as diarrhoea of the soul. In a tearful torrent of words he poured out a sad, sordid story from his past life. For some time this man had unquestionably co-existed with a guilt complex festering away in his innermost being. When he had unburdened his soul, I offered him the only healing resources I had at my disposal. I gave him absolution. It may have been pure coincidence but, shortly afterwards, the healing processes resumed and the skin grafts took.

To all intents and purposes that hospital room had become a confessional. I saw that man as profoundly diseased, and I had in my possession the antidote to his festering sickness of soul – God's word of pardon and peace. I saw that man bound and fettered in the prison-house of guilt, and I had at my disposal the means to liberate him – the Gospel word of forgiving grace.

It is my conviction that if the Protestant Church seriously believes that it has a healing and liberating ministry to perform, then it has to take the confessional seriously. (If you think the confessional is totally foreign to the Reformed tradition, then I advise you to consult John Calvin's Institutes.)

When all's said and done, there is immense therapeutic value in unburdening oneself in the presence of someone with whom one can be totally and transparently open – be that someone a minister, a priest or a confidential soul-mate.

In very truth, to find a safe place in which to be able to say from time to time 'This is the real me, warts and all' is an immensely beneficial thing. But then to be told, with absolute authority, that this 'real me' really is forgiven, accepted loved and wanted by God – perhaps that is the most healing thing a human being can ever hear. ■

THE HEALING MINISTRY

In the second part of his series,
the Rev Tom Cuthell looks at the ultimate healing.

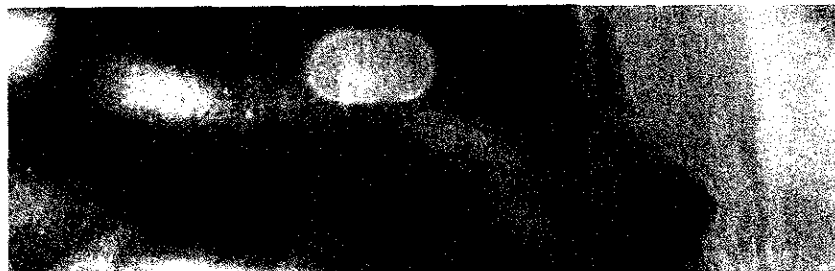
AS I understand them, the healings of Jesus, as recorded in the gospels, were signs that lent truth, reality and substance to his teachings. They were a spilling-over of his concern and compassion for people. On another level they represented a breaking-in of the Kingdom of God into a situation of disability, disease and distress. Every healing of Jesus has to be understood as a dethroning of the powers of evil by the powers of the Kingdom of God. In a very real sense Jesus' mission can be summed up as bringing the healing power of God's love to bear upon the moral, mental, physical and spiritual sickness of his time. The healing miracles were simply part of this grace-filled strategy.

I have always been intrigued by the formula, or form of words, that Jesus used on a number of occasions in his healing ministry – 'Your faith has made you well/saved you.' (See St Mark 5 v34, St Mark 10 v52, St Luke 17 v19) It would seem that faith on the part of the supplicant is an indispensable part of the healing process. Moreover, it would appear that there are a few instances where faith by proxy is deemed to be valid and acceptable – as in the case of the paralytic's friends (St Mark 2), the Roman centurion (St Matthew 8), and the Canaanite woman (St Matthew 15). I find it significant too that, because faith was such a scarce commodity in his home town, Jesus found himself incapable of effecting any deeds of power there (St Mark 6). It would seem, then, that faith is a critical factor when it comes to releasing healing energies, whereas unfaith acts as a block to the inflow of healing grace – a principle I have found to be true in my own experience of the healing ministry.

And yet a word of salutary caution is required here. Sometimes people can be disappointed, even disillusioned, if there are no discernible signs of physical healing following a healing ministry. Such people need to be handled in a careful and sensitive way. Where expectations of healing have been quickened but not fulfilled, people can sometimes be left not only confused and disillusioned but also with an added burden of guilt. The burden is compounded when some misguided and insensitive enthusiasts for healing claim that it is only lack of faith that stands between the sufferer and healing.

How dare they make such a sweeping judgment!!

I recall some years ago when David Watson, a prominent Church of England clergyman in charismatic/evangelical circles, was diagnosed with cancer. I am not exaggerating when I say that the faith of thousands upon thousands was mobilised on his behalf: heaven was buffeted with the prayers of thousands upon thousands interceding for him. It was all to no avail. The cancer continued its unrelenting course through his body



until it eventually consumed him. I understand that, following his death, many underwent a severe spiritual crisis because their faith in the power of prayer had been so irrepressibly absolute.

Notwithstanding the prayers, notwithstanding the faith of countless folk, was David Watson denied healing? In the mystery of providential grace he may have been denied a physical cure, but he was assuredly blessed with healing – in the sense of wholeness. Moreover, do we not, as Christians, believe that death, seen in the light of Easter, is the ultimate healing?

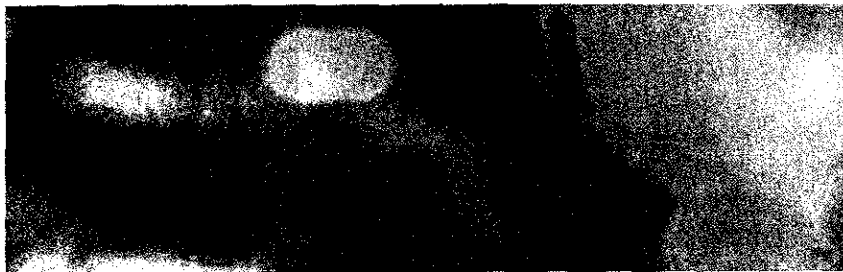
Perhaps the experience of the Apostle Paul can throw light on this vexing problem. If ever there was one who had absolute faith in the power of prayer, it was Paul. Yet it would seem that Paul was fated to co-exist with a chronic physical condition which he described as 'his thorn in the flesh' (see 2 Corinthians 12 v7). Was Paul referring to stammering, deafness, bodily injury, an infection of the eyes, migraine, malaria or what? Whatever it was, it would seem to have been some deep-seated, intractable illness. We find Paul testifying to the fact that he positively sweated in prayer, praying that the thorn might be removed, that he might be cured of this nasty, debilitating illness. However, Paul's prayer was not answered – at least not in the way he wanted it to be. Nonetheless God's healing did work in Paul, for Paul was given the grace, not only to come to terms with his stubborn thorn, but to rise triumphantly above it, to be more than conqueror. 'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.' (2 Corinthians 12 v9) In other words, instead of it getting on top of him, by the grace of God he got on top of it, even using it creatively to the glory of God. The point being – even where no physical cure takes place, God's healing grace can be actively and powerfully at work. We can all think of people denied a physical cure, yet whose lives are transformed out of all recognition, radiant with an inner peace and power and joy – Helen Keller is surely a case in point!

As a result of 20 years in the healing ministry I have concluded that we can never pre-programme the manner in which God's healing works. God does heal – but in his own way and in his own time. ■

Photo: Getty Images

'GOD LOVES THE DAMNED'

In the third part of his focus on the healing ministry, the Rev Tom Cunnell examines how Jesus reached out to society's 'untouchables'



EVERY time Jesus healed he was demonstrating beyond all shadow of doubt that the Kingdom of God has broken in with liberating, redemptive effect, that in God's order of things disease, illness, brokenness simply would not be tolerated.

Every time Jesus healed he was motivated and indeed energised by a love, a compassion and a pity that welled up from the very core of his being. His healings were never a calculating ploy on his part to, somehow, 'prove' his divinity. That would have been tantamount to using hurting, broken people as means to an end.

As I read the gospels, what intrigues me is how often Jesus is found healing 'outsiders' of every variety – the alien, the excluded, the marginalised and the stigmatised eg the leper (St Mark 1), the Gerasene demoniac (St Mark 5), the woman suffering from chronic bleeding (St Mark 5), the child of the Syro-Phoenician woman (St Mark 7), the centurion's servant (St Matthew 8), the ten lepers (St Luke 17), the blind beggar (St Luke 18). Moreover, in healing those deemed to be 'beyond the pale' Jesus is flouting with impunity many of the sacrosanct moral, religious and social taboos of conventional Jewry.

The healing of the leper is surely a case in point, for the leper is your archetypal outsider. In Jesus' day anyone suffering from leprosy was forced by Mosaic law to live outside the community in the quarantined squalor of makeshift concentration camps (see the taboos and laws relating to social and religious hygiene in Leviticus). When Jesus finds himself ambushed one day by a leper, he finds himself face to face with someone who lives the life of the damned, someone not only despised and rejected by men, but also someone who, it was generally believed, was despised and rejected by God. What fascinates me about this incident is that Jesus approaches the unapproachable, he touches the untouchable, as if to indicate that love cannot live at arm's length: love has to find a way of touching the loved one. Simply by touching the leper Jesus violates a whole set of religious, moral and cultural taboos that were themselves a violation of God's all-embracing love. Simply by touching the leper Jesus repairs his sense of being nothing but human scrap. As well as healing the leper's broken body, he heals his broken self-image,

enabling him to feel human again. Simply by touching him, he assures the leper that he, the very personification of the damned, is within range, not only of God's healing touch, but also God's all-embracing grace and love. It is this all-encompassing grace and love that becomes visible, tangible and accessible in the life and ministry of Jesus. Here is one who loves not only the lovely and the lovable, but also the unlovely and the unlovable. Jesus rejects the narrow exclusiveness of the religious system of his day, a system that brutally denies the outsider, the marginalised, the excluded and the stigmatised open and unrestricted access to God and his love. He rejects the populist notion that there are limits, boundaries to God's grace, love and mercy. And it is on the Cross of Calvary that his convictions are put to the ultimate test. He dies believing that not one single human being falls outwith the compass of his outstretched arms. The Cross of Christ is the centre of the circumference of the love of God.

One of my favourite hymns is 'There's a wideness in God's mercy'. The hymn also contains that magnificent line 'For the love of God is broader than the measures of man's mind'. Dare I suggest that narrowness is not an attribute of God, whereas breadth is? This, then, is the panoramic context in which I find myself pondering the healing stories of Jesus – stories that drive me to broaden and expand my idea of God's grace and love and mercy.

Alas, from time to time, the Church has tended to operate with a much smaller compass than the God whom it seeks to serve. Today the living Christ continues to challenge every religious mindset that seeks to place restriction notices on the grace and favour of God, to narrow down the circumference of the love of God. He challenges the exclusive mindset of a particular brand of Calvinism which would have us believe that the Saviour of the world died only for the elect, the chosen elite. He challenges the exclusive mindset of the Catholic Church which denies non-Catholics open and unrestricted access to the grace and favour of the Lord's Table. He challenges the prejudiced mindset of some churches which would bar gay Christians from their fellowships.

As Christians, we are called, after the fashion of Christ, to violate every man-made taboo which segregates, excludes and discriminates against people. In so doing we shall find ourselves healing the wounds, the scars and the disfigurements of those who stand within the orbit of God's love. It is in and through us that the rejected, the stigmatised, the outsider and the excluded may discover, perhaps for the first time, a gracious God, an accepting God, a kindly God, a healing God, a loving God. ■

THE EARS OF THE BODY OF CHRIST

In the fourth part of his analysis of the healing ministry, the Rev Tom Cuthell highlights the importance of listening.

IT is my conviction that Jesus considered everyone worthy of his undivided attention, even though he must have been 'deeced' by the clamorous demands made upon him. Though the gospels are not explicit, Jesus comes across as someone to whom the various bobs and bobs of humanity could talk freely and without inhibition, someone who had time, who made time to listen to them. Notwithstanding the fact that the blind, the deaf, the lame, the leprous, the paralysed, the schizophrenic yielded to his healing touch, at the same time Jesus liberated countless others of their burdens, giving them the undivided attention of his ears by listening caringly and costingly to their fears, pains, doubts, confusions, sorrows, anxieties, frustrations.

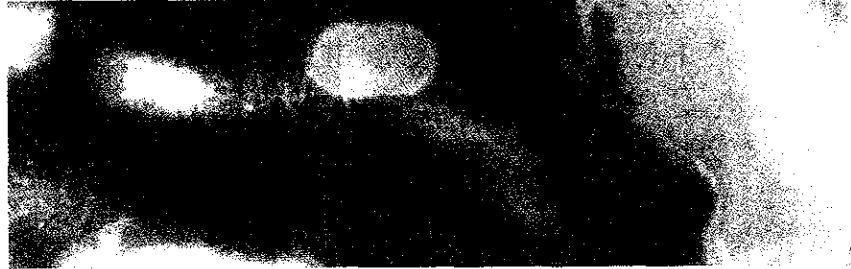
Beyond the shimmering veil of time and space this same Jesus continues to bend a listening ear to the persistent cry of humanity. Moreover, he can be trusted not to reach for the cotton wool whenever the human soul gives vent to its fears, its rage, its frustrations, its heartache.

My theme this month is the listening ear – often unfairly deemed to be the less glamorous side of the healing ministry. Be that as it may, the ministry of the listening ear bears the full weight of a biblical 'imprimatur'. Take Job's outburst, recorded in Job 21 v1 – 'Listen to me, do but listen, and let that be the comfort you offer me.' Job was rudely denied the consoling comfort he so desperately craved. Instead of simply listening to him, his so-called 'comforters' subjected him to a theological debate instead. Job was mercilessly bombarded with their half-baked religious clichés which, far from resolving his huge agony of soul, only served to aggravate it all the more, searingly rubbing salt into the open wound, as it were.

I wonder – have we ever subjected someone in dire straits to a liberal overdose of our own tongue, when all the time what he really craved was a listening ear – a human bin into which he could deposit all the psychological and emotional debris silting up the flow of his life?

We find ourselves living in an age when 'she didn't even listen' is a *cri de coeur* we hear all too often. Our innate self-concern and self-focus has rendered us incapable of listening to each other. Is it little wonder that Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German theologian who was hanged by the Nazis in 1945, felt moved to call for a moratorium on all pious chatter? He wrote, 'Many people today are looking for an ear that will listen. They do not find it among Christians, because Christians are talking when they should be listening. He who no longer listens to his brother, will soon no longer be listening to God either.'

It is my conviction that to listen with transparent sincerity, to offer our undivided attention, is one of the most compassionate gestures we can perform for another person. It may be a somewhat threadbare cliché, but its truth remains



valid – 'a burden shared is a burden halved.' Moreover, simply to make available a listening ear and to do so caringly and costingly can itself be a healing – for nine times out of ten, even before we make a single tentative suggestion, our neighbour will leave us, his mind at rest, his soul in equilibrium. In other words, what she has been unconsciously seeking has not been advice or even counselling, but simply an empathetic presence – a caring, non-judgmental presence that enabled her to see her vexing problem in a totally different light and from a totally different perspective, and perhaps even a way of coping with it. To really listen to someone with undivided attention is to accord them the utmost respect: they are being unconditionally accepted for who and what they are. Every day people swim into our ken who resemble corked-up bottles, who needs more than any number of high-falutin' therapists simply someone to uncork them, someone prepared to listen to them and drink in whatever comes out of the bottle!!! To offer a listening ear is but a variant of the core commandment 'love your neighbour'.

One of the settings where we in St Cuthbert's, Edinburgh have begun to exercise the ministry of the listening ear is our Chapel of the Anamchara. 'Anamchara' is an old Celtic word that comes to us from deep within the mists of antiquity, from that halcyon period when the Celtic Church leavened the life of these islands. Literally translated, it means 'soul friend' We believe that out there in the community, especially in the business community that lies on our doorstep, are people co-existing with emotional pain, people with hidden fears, anxieties, stresses, burdens, traumas. We in St Cuthbert's are developing the ministry of the listening ear in the belief that what such people need is a modern day 'anamchara' or soul friend, someone prepared to offer a listening, caring, non-judgmental ear, someone to whom they can fully and transparently unburden themselves, someone who may enable them to go on their way rejoicing, significantly lighter in mind and spirit.

Few of us possess the gifts and qualities, the flair and panache of a top-drawer saint, but all of us, without exception, can offer a listening ear. All that is required is some simple training in reflective listening techniques, coupled with a compassionate heart.

Thus we become the ears of the Body of Christ. ■

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