

Sunday Sermon

Revd Canon Charles Jenkin – 18th July 2021 – Trinity 7

Ephesians 2.11-end; Mark 6.30-34,53-end

Our readings this morning are about the healing work of God, but with vital and interesting differences. The Gospel reading gives us a picture of the ministry of Jesus very much taking off. His reputation as a healer was spreading and people were fascinated and desperate. Jesus and his disciples were being mobbed and badly needed some time off, which was being very difficult to find.

In the ministry of Jesus in the Gospels, it often seems that the personal healings of Jesus were the main thing. But really they are signs of a deeper and wider healing of humanity, which God is accomplishing in Jesus. Deeper than physical healing; wider than personal healing. But at this particular stage in Jesus ministry, this is not yet evident.

In our first reading, from his letter to the Ephesians, St Paul writes of the healing in Christ of divisions between Jew and gentile, and this is no academic cultural analysis. The history of Israel had been stained by constant conflict with other nations; the sense of separation had been huge and deep; and at the time of writing, Israel remained under occupation by gentiles and subjugated to a gentile power. The bitterness ran very deep.

And yet Christianity flourished in the first century because, having emerged from Judaism, it was amongst the gentile communities which had grown up around the Jewish synagogues all around the Mediterranean, where Christianity grew like wildfire. People who were already attracted by the Jewish faith in the one true God, but who had remained excluded from Judaism by their race, were fertile ground for Christian faith. God was in Christ healing the divisions of humanity, reconciling all peoples to himself and to one another.

Jesus often said that his disciples would accomplish many more healings than he, and perform more extraordinary signs than he. This can seem strange to us, given who Jesus is, and it's not clear that the early church really understood this either. How can it be possible for us to do so? But what Jesus was really referring to, is the long term healing work of the Gospel in human history, reconciling people to God, and to themselves, and to one another, healing the divisions of humanity. Which includes things like justice and peace, and achieving these not in worldly ways through domination and conquest, but through the reconciliation of God. It is this deeper, long term healing that St Paul has grasped in his letters, and he is amazed.

Personal healings headlined Jesus' ministry. The healing of division between Jew and Gentile headlined the growth of the early church. But both of these are signs of deeper healings in people souls and in human communities. And the important questions for the Church of today is therefore, what is the work of healing that the disciples of Jesus are called to

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minister in our day? What is our headline Christian healing? What are the signs of healing that we here at St Mary-le-Tower in Ipswich are called to perform?

Well, look around you. The need for reconciliation in all sorts of ways is all around us. Cancel culture reveals the extent to which people are not at peace. Social media trolling reveals huge reservoirs of anger and frustration. People may be more free and more wealthy but they don't seem to be any more at peace with themselves, and our nation seems to be full of angry divisions these last few years. We no longer appear to be a nation at ease with itself, and we are not alone in this.

So today, it is a ministry of healing of communities, of society, to which the Church is called. This is why churches are called to engage with the communities around them. This is why St Mary-le-Tower has the Tower House project. Because being religious is not enough. Because being concerned only with personal spiritual wellbeing is not enough. Jesus came to heal the whole world, and that work continues today, and we need to be part of it.

The healing signs that Christians are called upon to perform in our day, are not so much personal healings. (We have the NHS for that now.) Rather it is for the healing of communities and societies for which we need to engage, in word and deed. And it is my conviction that churches will not grow today unless that work is being done. Such healing cannot be achieved by anger and frustration with the world, or indeed ourselves, but only by the love and peace of the Gospel, and of God. Amen.

CJ. 18:07:21