

Sermon by Prebendary David Saville at the evening Healing Service on 21 February 2010, based on Luke 5:17-26

Many people were being healed in those early days of Jesus' ministry, so not surprisingly we read that "just then, some men came, carrying a paralyzed man" v18. Only way many sick people were going to get there at all – see 4:40. Good to have in chapter 5 this **focus on one person** who had to be brought by friends or family.

I guess it is the experience of most of us that there are times when we are being carried along by others. They may be giving us a vast amount of physical or emotional help; it may include taking us to Jesus in their thoughts and prayers. One of the very moving things in our own lives at the moment is knowing that friends, in Holy Trinity and also around the country – and beyond, are praying for us. So I like the hint in the parallel account (Mark 2:3) that there may have been more than 4 in the group of supporters.

A helpful quote on this passage from Jeffrey John's book 'The Meaning in the Miracles':

'What they do for their friend is a perfect image of Christian intercession. It is the vocation of all Christians to carry others to God in their prayers and lay them before him. It is hard work, which can often feel like trying to 'dig through the ceiling'. The people we pray for may have no faith at all, or even knowledge that they are being prayed for. But God, it seems, can use our act of will to act for others: our prayer may open a channel that lets his grace into this world to work for them in ways we ourselves may never see.'

We don't know if the paralyzed man had any **faith** that this trip was worth making. Verse 20a is ambiguous. The man *may* have asked to be taken but perhaps he went with reluctance or scepticism. I know there are times when I am at a low ebb, and

my wife Sue and others lift me up and are prepared to exercise faith for my healing and strength.

On Monday a friend on the phone said, “you keep taking the tablets, and we’ll keep praying”. On that evening, that seemed a fair and realistic allocation of tasks!!

This evening, all of us can be involved in praying and being prayed for. Only a few will lay on hands, but we can all pray for the people we see going forward. None of us has to go forward, but probably many of us will take advantage of the opportunity, and others will pray where we are in our pew.

What do we pray for? What aspect of healing do we personally need?

I think the men in Luke 5 were clear about why they were going to Jesus, but Jesus trumps that by first of all saying (20b) ‘Friend, your sins are forgiven you’. Surprised them and antagonized the religious leaders. But we can assume Jesus regarded that as the man’s priority, his **greatest need**.

We are on to delicate ground here. It’s so important to realize that Jesus was not implying that the paralysis was due to his personal sin, as a kind of punishment. Not the teaching of the New Testament.

Of course we know that inappropriate behaviour and life style can cause or exacerbate physical ill-health, in us as well as others. We are also becoming increasingly aware of the astonishing psychosomatic element in physical illness; in other words, our spiritual and emotional and social condition including things like fear and stress and trauma, can lead to illness and can hinder recovery.

So, when Jesus said “your sins are forgiven”, he is addressing the **fundamental human need**, the restoration of a right relationship with God, and he is perhaps putting the man in a better position to be physically healed. (I think it is fair to say that there is probably a psychosomatic element in several of the

Gospel healings.) So the answer to the questions, *What do we pray for? What aspect of healing do we personally need? What do you most need tonight?* will probably be a variety of things, because in us as human beings heart, mind, spirit, body are all so inter-related.

When people around the country email Sue or me and say they are praying for us, and particularly for me because of the myeloma, we are thrilled and moved, but I sometimes wonder **what they are praying for**. My guess is that some are faithfully and regularly asking the Lord for physical recovery, with a faith that usually exceeds mine by a mile. Others are praying for our spiritual and emotional well-being, and of course just knowing about their commitment to praying lifts and encourages us.

What about when you pray for others, or when we hear the Holy Trinity intercession list of the sick read out in our worship? (We are on some more delicate ground here!) My hunch, and I certainly notice it in myself, is that these days we are more confident in praying for everything *except* **physical healing**. (No, that's not quite true: we **do pray**, as of course we always should, for the success and effectiveness of people's medical care and treatment; that God, who has led us to such amazing medical advances, will work through these for healing.)

What we are much less sure about is expecting or even asking for healing when God would have to do something more, over and above; whether or not we call it miraculous.

There are understandable and **positive reasons** for this. In Luke chapter 5 Jesus has reminded us what is the priority.

When people pray for Sue that she will have the patience and stamina to cope with me, and for us that we will sense the presence of the Lord Jesus and not have our faith knocked or be tempted to give up, this is good and necessary. Our inner transformation and spiritual growth are such basic needs. See

Paul's prayer in *Ephesians 3:16ff*, and the desired outcomes from suffering - *Romans 5:2b-4*, and from trials - *James 1:2-4*.

And, any healing of our bodies is only a temporary patch up job; even Lazarus had eventually to grow old and/or ill and die – again! We don't take the present bodies with us – praise the Lord! (Although we will get new, glorious ones.)

BUT, to my mind, there are some **less positive reasons** why we do not expect or even ask for physical healing today, apart from the natural healing processes of the body or the work of medicine.

One is an increasing uncertainty in many people's minds about the historicity of most of the healing miracles in the Gospels; so often I read or hear "even if this did not actually happen like this, what it means for us is..."

Another is that few of us have **seen or experienced** such answers to prayer, whether an almost complete healing or even a major or considerable improvement in some condition. By definition, miracles or (as perhaps they are better called) **wonderful answers to prayer** are obviously rare, but they do exist – even if they are then sometimes hyped up and exaggerated!

I believe Jesus the healer has not entirely retired from that part of his ministry! There are still the signs, pointers, [as in the Gospels] to the Lord's intention for his kingdom to overcome sin and death and sickness and the powers of evil; eventually 'mourning and crying and pain will be no more' (Rev 21) and we are grateful for every sign, every reminder of that hope.

Your main need may not be something physical; for myself some of my greatest needs are the overcoming of fear, and protection from frustration or despair.

But of course I want physical healing in some measure, and in this area of healing, I think the danger is either to set up false

“over the top” expectations or to have **no expectations**, which is tragic.

I believe this passage in Luke 5 not only has important things to teach us about the prayer and support of **friends**, the priority of **forgiveness**, and the **inter-connectedness** of us as mind body and spirit.

It also can encourage us to look afresh to the Lord who, in all his ministry of healing, acts out of overflowing **compassion** to those he is ready to call, as indeed he called the paralyzed man, his '*friend*'.

What do you most need tonight? You have to leave to him the answers to your prayer, but I hope you can dare to come and ask (aloud or just quietly), trusting his **compassion** and, yes, 'the **power of the Lord to heal**' (Luke 5:17).
