

PROPER 21 B 09 ~ Sunday, September 27, 2009

- Four weeks ago today, after church, I drove over to St Mary's Hospital to see Florence Moore, who was at that time one of our oldest parishioners. Her health had suddenly deteriorated. I went to her bedside and we talked. With the change in her condition, she told me she was past the point of surgery, and she had decided to go into hospice. Florence faced the prospect of death squarely and prayerfully, and with her mind on her family. After our conversation, when it became clear that she was tiring, I asked her if we might pray together. During the next few minutes, I anointed Florence with holy oil and offered prayers for her healing, in heart, mind, soul, and body, according to her every need. In just a couple of days, Florence died peacefully, surrounded by members of her family.
- Almost everywhere I go, I carry with me this small bottle. Inside, it is *simply* olive oil. But it is not *only* olive oil; for it is consecrated or holy oil, oil that has been blessed using a prayer in our Book of Common Prayer. I have had it with me when stopping at accident scenes to offer prayer. I have it with me when I go to the hospital. And I have it with me here at church so that I can offer prayers for healing to those who share with me that they having a health challenge of one kind or another.
- I want to invite you to pick up the Prayer Book from the rack in front of you, and turn with me to page 455. There, in the middle of that page, is a prayer used by priests to bless oil for healing. *{pray the prayer}* This prayer of blessing over the oil is a part of a larger rite for our ministry to the sick. It is a part of the Prayer Book that contains a number of very meaningful prayers, to which I hope you will turn when you find yourself facing illness. And I would like you to know that I am always available after the service, after I greet everyone, to pray with you here at the communion rail, when I can also anoint you for healing.
- As you think about this, and think about what I have shared with you concerning Florence, *I hope some important questions come to your mind*. Among them, I hope you wonder why I anointed Florence *for healing*, when clearly – based on what both she and her daughter told me – she had been admitted to hospice, a transition point of preparation for physical death. And I hope that other questions like this came to your mind as you heard James, in our Epistle reading, call upon every one of us in very clear terms. James says that any of us who are suffering should pray. And he says that any who are sick “should call for the elders (or *presbyters*) of the church and have them pray over them, anointing them with oil in the name of the Lord.” For, as James says, “*the prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up...*”
- We know from the Gospels that Jesus – in his earthly life and ministry in Palestine – really did heal people *physically*. And we know from the praying experience of the Church that Jesus really does physically heal people today. *But then* – and this can be the hard part to deal with – just as back in Gospel times, Jesus does not always *immediately* and *physically* heal everyone who is sick or injured, who calls upon him. This strikes many of us as paradoxical.

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- Indeed, this fact may seem to be an outright contradiction of Gospel promises, and the promise of James in today's Epistle reading, that *if we pray to Jesus or in his name, he will heal the person who is need*. We need to face this apparent contradiction squarely. For what it will reveal is *not* something lacking in the Gospel, or in God's power or desire to heal us. Facing squarely the apparent contradiction between Gospel promises of healing, and an apparent lack of physical improvement for many who ask for it, *will reveal our need for greater discernment* concerning what this is all about. We will discover that, when it comes to healing, we may not be reading the Gospel with an understanding of the aims and purposes of God in his Kingdom.
- The first thing we discover is *the point of Jesus' healings in his earthly ministry*. Time and again, the Gospels describe his healings *as signs of the Kingdom of God* coming near in people's lives. However much a sick person might focus on getting well, for Jesus, a miracle like a physical healing *was never an end in itself*. Yes, physically healing a person was a good thing. But it was *not the greatest* good thing. The greatest good thing was *the coming into our lives* of the Kingdom of God in Jesus. This was the point of the physical healings and of all his miracles. *Jesus physically healed people in order to display the power of the Kingdom of God*, a power which has a higher purpose than simply physical health. And this helps to explain why *it was never Jesus' goal to physically heal everyone in Palestine* who suffered from illness during his three short years of public ministry. He could have. *But he didn't*. Yet, everywhere he went, he taught, and he did signs that always pointed beyond to the coming Kingdom, for which he asked us to pray.
- And so, in light of this Gospel discovery, we come back to our own experience of illness or injury. It is the most natural thing in the world for us to want to be physically healed from these things. *And soon!* And the Gospels and the Epistle of James encourage us to pray and ask for this. But *what they do not encourage us to do*, is to *presume, or even to expect*, that a physical healing will *always* result from that prayer.
- *'Now wait a minute...'* you will say. *'It says very plainly in our Epistle reading today, "The prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up".'* And this is exactly where we need some of that deeper reading of the Gospel, seeking understanding about the aims and purposes of God. The Prayer Book teaches us the most important thing about prayer we can ever learn. *Prayer is responding to God*. Prayer is *responding* to God. (See the Catechism, *Book of Common Prayer*, p.856) Notice what that does not say. It does not say that prayer is *God responding to us*. And so, when James speaks of the prayer of faith, James is referring to a process of seeking to respond *to God and to God's will*, in love and not in fear, in trust and not in an effort to control the outcome. When James says the prayer of faith will save the sick, James is teaching us that prayer, *like faith*, is a response to what God is doing and to what God wants to do. When we respond to God in faith, we pray. When we pray, we respond to God in faith.

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- The second thing we want to notice here is what it means for the sick person *to be saved* by the prayer of faith. James does not say that the sick person will be *physically healed* – he says that the sick person will be *saved*, which might – *of course* – include a physical healing. But it also points beyond the moment to *that greater thing*, life in the Kingdom. Responding to God in faith by praying, we are saved from life *outside* the Kingdom, from life apart from a living relationship with God. And this is exactly why James says the sick person who is saved by faith *will be raised up* by the Lord. Notice the verb there – it is not an accident. James says that what will happen for the saved-by-faith person is exactly what happened to Jesus. And it is exactly what Jesus promises to everyone who respond to him in faith. *We will be raised up. Resurrection!* Some, but *not everyone*, who respond in the prayer of faith, will be physically healed. But EVERYONE who responds in the prayer of faith will be saved, and raised up into eternal life.
- For Christians, healing, health, and wholeness, are inter-related ideas. To have health, to be healed and to be whole, involve *a complex inter-relationship* between heart and mind and soul and body. This is one of the reasons why Jesus invites us to love the Lord our God with *all* our heart, with *all* our soul, with *all* our mind and with *all* our strength. We are to love and enjoy God with the wholeness of our being, for this prefigures our fuller life in the fullness of the Kingdom. And so, to pray for healing, is to pray for the wholeness and fullness of being, and the wholeness and fullness of life.
- Heavenly Father, giver of life and health: Comfort and relieve your sick servants among us, and give your power of healing to those who minister to their needs, that we may be strengthened in our weakness and have confidence in your loving care; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.* (adapted from the Collect for Strength and Confidence, *Book of Common Prayer*, p.459)